



Washington State Fusion Center INFOCUS



THURSDAY — 10 FEB 2022

	International	National	Regional and Local
Events, Opportunities Go to articles	02/10 Hong Kong Covid infections surge 02/10 WHO: Africa Covid cases much higher 02/10 New Zealand convoy protesters arrests 02/10 Philippines lifts ban on foreign travelers 02/10 Paris police ban protesters road blockades 02/10 US watching for tips leading to an invasion 02/10 Hijab protests spread in India 02/09 Tonga extends lockdown in capital 02/09 Closed-loop Olympics reports more cases 02/09 Germany relaxes Covid rules despite surge 02/09 British PM plans lifting all virus restrictions 02/09 China 'zero-Covid' policy to Southeast Asia 02/09 Turkey steps up Ukraine support 02/09 Russia, Belarus in joint military drills 02/09 US warns: Russia provoke Ukraine invasion 02/09 Anti-vaccine convoy forms in France 02/09 Canada blockade snarls supply chains 02/09 China, Russia in 'alliance of autocracies' 02/09 Mexico wants to 'pause' relations w/Spain 02/09 Slovakia okays defense military treaty w/US 02/09 Australia intel: foreign election interference 02/09 Afghan families hard transition SKorea 02/09 Russia figure skaters hit by doping claim 02/09 Alarm over rise in fires Colombia Amazon	02/10 Covid infection increase risk heart ailments 02/10 Higher inflation costing \$250 extra a month 02/10 Recall: Tesla vehicles; 10th recall 4months 02/09 Immunize young children now or wait data? 02/09 Confusion, patchwork over policy rollbacks 02/09 As states drop mask rules, CDC stands firm 02/09 Trucker convoy protest at Super Bowl? 02/09 Convoy-style protest plan gains support 02/09 Public employees in Puerto Rico protest 02/09 Segregated neighborhoods still pervasive 02/09 Fatal police shootings in 2021 set record 02/09 Navy discharges 240 for vaccine refusal 02/09 Supply chain mess stirs cup shortages 02/09 Inflation: rising prices hit in US, world 02/09 Gas prices hit highest level in 8 years 02/09 CDC: Hawaii highest life expectancy	02/09 Health officials hopeful and vigilant 02/09 DOH: 1,391,026 cases, 11,194 deaths 02/09 Gov. decision indoor mask mandate soon 02/09 Schools chief: end WA student mask rules 02/09 WA ends outdoor mask mandate next week 02/09 Seattle 911 'Nurse Navigator' program 02/09 Seattle police hiring bonuses not funded 02/09 King Co. pushes for end to concrete strike 02/09 Sound Transit report: Apple Cup train stall 02/09 Tensions flare at dueling rallies in Kirkland 02/09 Retired Seattle firefighters fear building sale 02/09 Boeing Seafair to return '100%' this summer 02/09 Bellingham limits commercial natural gas
Cyber Awareness Go to articles	02/10 Ransomware warning critical infrastructure 02/09 Banks warned of possible cyberattacks 02/09 Russia targets 4 dark web marketplaces 02/09 Study: women in UK were cyber-flashed 02/09 Romance fraud losses spike amid Covid 02/09 Hamas cyberspies return w/new malware 02/09 Magecart attacks target outdated Magento 02/09 PHP Everywhere RCE flaw WordPress sites	02/09 Major ransomware trends 02/09 Linux malware on the rise 02/09 Fake Windows 11 update installers 02/09 Covid news fuels rise in cybercrime 02/09 FBI: \$68M lost to SIM swapping attacks 02/09 Malicious use Regsvr32 Windows utility 02/09 Cybercrime growing threat intelligent bots 02/09 Most prolific year on record data breaches	
Terror Conditions Go to articles	02/10 Somalia: suicide bomber kills 6 02/09 UK reduces terrorism threat level 02/09 Main suspect in Paris attacks trial testifies 02/09 Violence erupts Syria camp for ISIS families 02/09 Ontario teen sentenced 3yrs; terror charges	02/09 Assessment: Super Bowl 'attractive target' 02/09 Illinois woman guilty plea domestic terror 02/09 Twitter activity link to synagogue attack?	
Suspicious, Unusual Go to articles	02/10 Seals dying in droves South Africa coast 02/09 Alarm: plastic lost in cargo ship disasters	02/09 Solar storm destroys dozens of satellites 02/09 What happens to stealth jet on ocean floor? 02/09 Study: 1-in-3 w/detectable levels herbicide	02/10 FAA: 28 planes hit by lasers near SEA
Crime, Criminals Go to articles	02/09 Cartel borrows terrorist brutal tactics 02/09 Mexico troops enter cartel-dominated town 02/09 Court: Uganda pay DRC \$325M reparations	02/09 Threats against lawmakers surge 02/09 Triple murder solved after 50 years 02/09 MI gov. kidnapping plot trial: 2nd guilty plea	02/09 King County Drug Diversion Court 02/09 Seattle police: Pioneer Square shooting 02/09 Seattle businesses: crime out of control 02/09 Deputies recover \$100,000 stolen property 02/09 Ballard residents decry illegally parked RVs 02/09 Kitsap Co. deputies look for prolific car thief

[DISCLAIMER and FAIR USE Notice](#)

Events, Opportunities

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 WHO: Africa Covid cases much higher
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/africa-covid-cases-could-be-seven-times-higher-than-reported-who-2022-02-10/

GIST	<p>JOHANNESBURG, Feb 10 (Reuters) - The World Health Organization estimates that the number of COVID-19 infections in Africa could be seven times higher than official data suggests, while deaths from the virus could be two to three times higher, its regional head said on Thursday.</p> <p>"We're very much aware that our surveillance systems problems that we had on the continent, with access to testing supplies, for example, have led to an underestimation of the cases," Dr Matshidiso Moeti told a regular online media briefing.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/10 Recall: Tesla vehicles; 10th recall 4mo.
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/business/autos-transportation/tesla-recalls-nearly-579000-us-vehicles-over-pedestrian-warning-risk-sounds-2022-02-10/
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON, Feb 10 (Reuters) - Tesla Inc is recalling 578,607 vehicles in the United States because pedestrians may be unaware of an approaching vehicle if warning risk sounds are obscured, U.S. regulators said Thursday.</p> <p>Under increasing scrutiny from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), Tesla has issued 10 U.S. recalls over the last four months.</p> <p>The electric vehicle manufacturer is recalling some 2020-2022 Model S, Model X, Model Y, and 2017-2022 Model 3 vehicles because the "Boombox function" allows sounds to be played through an external speaker while the vehicle is in motion.</p> <p>NHTSA said the vehicles fail to comply with a federal motor vehicle safety standard on minimum sound requirements for electric vehicles.</p> <p>Tesla will perform an over-the-air software update that will disable the Boombox functionality when the vehicle is in Drive, Neutral and Reverse modes. Many of Tesla's recent recalls have been to address software issues.</p> <p>Tesla said it was not aware of any crashes, injuries or fatalities related to recall.</p> <p>After Tesla introduced "Boombox" in December 2020, NHTSA issued an information request in January 2021, the automaker said. That was followed by a number of virtual meetings on the issue over subsequent months.</p> <p>In September, NHTSA upgraded an investigation into the issue, Tesla said. In October Tesla defended tests and rationale used to determine Boombox's compliance. Tesla agreed to a recall after two days of meetings last month.</p> <p>Boombox uses the Pedestrian Warning System (PWS) speaker and users can customize sounds.</p> <p>Under rules mandated by Congress, automakers must add sounds to electric vehicles when they are moving at speeds of up to 18.6 miles per hour (30 km per hour) to help prevent injuries among pedestrians, cyclists and the blind.</p> <p>Electric vehicles are often harder to hear at lower speeds than gasoline-powered engines. At higher speeds, tire noise, wind resistance, and other factors eliminate the need for alert sounds, NHTSA said previously.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/10 Hong Kong Covid infections surge
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/hong-kong-leader-deeply-sorry-long-queues-amid-covid-surge-2022-02-10/

HONG KONG, Feb 10 (Reuters) - Hong Kong reported 986 new coronavirus infections on Thursday as authorities scramble to contain an outbreak which medical experts warn could see 28,000 daily cases by the end of March, with the unvaccinated elderly a particular worry.

The rise in cases, up 10-fold since Feb. 1, is proving to be the biggest test for the global financial hub's "dynamic zero" policy of virus suppression, which has turned it into one of the world's most isolated cities.

Following mainland China, Hong Kong is trying to curb outbreaks as soon as possible, in contrast with many other places that are trying to "live with COVID", relying on high vaccination rates to bring protection while easing restrictions.

The fast-spreading Omicron variant is testing both approaches, though experts have said Hong Kong's strategy looks increasingly unsustainable with cases ballooning.

Leader Carrie Lam said she was "deeply sorry and anxious" as residents, including elderly and children, queued for hours at testing centres and to enter isolation facilities after daily infections doubled to a record 1,161 cases on Wednesday.

Writing on her official Facebook page, Lam said the government was working hard to enhance capacity and that the fast-spreading infections, hitting places like elderly care homes, were the last thing she wanted to see.

"Citizens have to wait for a long time to receive testing and a large number of people who have tested positive have been waiting for a long time for isolation facilities," she said.

"I am deeply sorry and anxious."

Lam said the city was not able to try to live with the virus because more than 50% of the elderly have not been vaccinated.

About 82% of the city's residents have had at least one vaccine shot but many elderly people have been hesitant. Three elderly have died this week from coronavirus, authorities said on Thursday.

However, vaccination rates have finally started to surge in recent days, particularly among older folk, as infections climb and even tougher anti-virus measures like vaccine passports are being put in place.

TEST CENTRES

Hong Kong has reported more than 4,000 infections over the past two weeks, versus just two in December, taking its tally to more than 18,000 since the outbreak began in 2020, with 216 deaths, figures that are much lower than those seen in other major cities around the world.

The city could see 28,000 new cases a day by the end of March, with its tally of deaths rising to 1,000 by June, health experts from the University of Hong Kong said this week.

The experts modelled scenarios that they said indicated Hong Kong could only return to a "zero-covid" state if the entire city was locked down for two to three months.

The government declined to comment directly on speculation of a lockdown, reiterating that people needed to take all measures to contain the virus and limit social activities.

They have responded to the latest surge with the toughest suppression measures yet, despite an increasing social and economic toll on the city's 7.5 million residents.

	<p>Public gatherings of more than two people are banned from Thursday while gatherings in homes have also been restricted. The rules add to already strict measures that have forced restaurants to close from 6. p.m. and shut most churches to schools, gyms and cinemas.</p> <p>About 200,000 people in the Discovery Bay residential area, where many foreigners live, have been ordered to get tested after the government said it detected coronavirus in sewage.</p> <p>Typically, people are mandated to test if they have been in an area where infections are detected, and tens of thousands have thronged testing centres across the city in recent days with queues stretching hundreds of metres.</p> <p>Ching Tang, a 50-year old resident waiting to get vaccinated, said the pandemic has greatly affected many aspects of life.</p> <p>"Some older people don't even dare to go out. They stockpile food for many days. Everyone is worried...I hope the government can do better."</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/09 Closed-loop Olympics reports more cases
SOURCE	https://www.newsmax.com/newsfront/2022-olympics-china-beijing-winter-olympics/2022/02/09/id/1056254/
GIST	<p>Statistics since Monday show China's "closed-loop" Olympic village reported 465 positive COVID-19 cases, 159 of which are among athletes and team members, according to The New York Times.</p> <p>Among the infected is U.S. bobsledder Elana Meyers Taylor, Breitbart reported on Wednesday. Taylor, who bore the American flag at the opening ceremony, became infected in Beijing two days after arriving at the Olympics, though she had no symptoms.</p> <p>"Everything I was told was, 'Just get inside the bubble — once you get inside the bubble, you're good,'" she told The Washington Post.</p> <p>The Olympic village at the 2022 Beijing Winter Games houses an estimated 60,000 athletes, team officials, media and volunteers, the BBC reported.</p> <p>Referred to as a closed loop, this year's village is made up of three sealed-off "bubbles" spread over a 100-mile area. Each bubble is centered on a sporting venue and is connected through travel lanes.</p> <p>According to Breitbart, Taylor is housed in a separate quarantine isolation center and must test negative twice in a row before her next event on Sunday or risk missing it.</p> <p>Outside the bubble zones, China has reported 128 active COVID-19 cases in the country with a daily average of 108, the Times' tracker indicated.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/10 Higher inflation costing \$250 extra a month
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/higher-inflation-is-probably-costing-you-250-a-month-11644489000
GIST	<p>The average U.S. household is spending an additional \$250 a month because of inflation that is rising at its fastest rate in nearly 40 years, a new economic analysis showed.</p> <p>The squeeze stems from higher prices across a range of products and services, including cars, gasoline, furniture and groceries.</p> <p>Inflation surged in the last year, hitting 7% in December as strong demand collided with pandemic-related limits on production and transportation, creating shortages and driving up prices.</p>

“A lot of people are hurting because of high inflation. \$250 a month—that’s a big burden,” said Ryan Sweet, a senior economist at Moody’s Analytics who conducted the analysis. “It really hammers home the point of ‘what is the cost of inflation?’”

Mr. Sweet came up with the figure by comparing what the average household spent under 7% inflation versus the amount it would have spent when inflation was 2.1%, the average in 2018 and 2019.

Prices for certain goods and services jumped more than prices for others—which means people who paid for those things probably have suffered a bigger inflation burden than those who didn’t.

Any consumers unlucky enough to have needed a new washing machine might have taken a bigger hit compared with others from inflation, because laundry-equipment prices leapt 12.1% last year.

Research shows that inflation is also squeezing some groups, on average, more than others. The consumer-price index reflects the change in prices for the average basket of spending. But people’s spending baskets vary based on who they are, which influences to some degree their daily needs, where they live, how they get around and what they do for fun.

With prices for different goods and services rising at different rates, those variations influence how big a chunk inflation is eating out of their budgets.

A [study](#) by [Wells Fargo](#) & Co. economists broke out the impact in fine demographic detail. It uses the spending basket for 2019 and 2020—more recent than that used for CPI—and found that inflation hit 6.5% in December, down from the 7% reported by the Labor Department using the spending basket for the previous two years.

The calculations don’t necessarily capture the whole picture of each demographic group’s financial realities. The economists noted that the way the government measures housing costs means they likely overstated the cost burden for homeowners and understated it for renters. Lower-earning households devote the biggest share of their budgets to rent, which means they probably are experiencing [much higher inflation](#).

Here are some of the study’s findings:

- Middle-class households were squeezed harder than other groups, with prices up 6.7% in December. That is 0.5 percentage points higher than for the lowest and highest income brackets. Transportation costs proved decisive here: Middle-class households spend a bigger share of their budgets than others on gasoline—its price was up nearly 50% in December—and used vehicles. Higher earners tend to buy new cars, prices for which climbed at a slower rate. Just 72% of households in the bottommost earning group owned or leased vehicles in 2020, compared with 90% overall, according to Labor Department data.
- Higher-earning households spent relatively more on dining out and recreation, which rose much less than overall inflation. This group also devotes more spending toward education, in part because, on average, it has more children under 18 years old than other income groups, Labor Department data show.
- Hispanic or Latino households faced inflation of 7.1%, thanks again to a disproportionately large share of spending on used autos and gasoline. That compared with 5.6% for Asian families, who tend to earn more than the average American household.
- Those ages 35-44 saw their costs rise 6.9% in 2021, higher than any other age group, though the rate for younger age groups was just slightly less. Those ages 65 and up experienced 5.8% inflation, in large part because of the share of their spending that went toward healthcare—16%, versus 4% for those under 25. Healthcare services rose just 2.5% in 2021. Younger consumers spent a bigger share of their budgets on cars and gasoline.

	<p>Inflation's ripple effects might affect groups differently, too. An analysis of auto lending by New York Fed economists found that surging auto prices offset the drop in interest rates, translating to an 8% jump in the monthly payment for the typical new auto-loan borrower to \$418 in 2021 compared with 2020.</p> <p>That so far hasn't resulted in trouble making payments—except among the under-30 crowd. Delinquency rates among this group rose in the fourth quarter, suggesting that “there may be challenges brewing for some younger borrowers,” the economists said.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/09 Navy discharges 240; vaccine refusal
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/09/politics/navy-discharge-military-members-vaccine-mandate/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)The US Navy said Wednesday that it has discharged 240 service members for refusing to get the Covid-19 vaccine as required by the Pentagon's vaccine mandate.</p> <p>A majority of the service members, 217, were active duty, and one was a US Navy Reserve member, according to a Navy news release. All of those service members received honorable characterizations for their discharges from service, meaning they are still eligible to receive veteran benefits.</p> <p>Fewer than two dozen -- 22 of the 240 -- were discharged while still undergoing training within their first 180 days of active-duty service.</p> <p>As of Wednesday, the Navy has granted 10 permanent medical exemptions, 250 temporary medical exemptions and 50 administrative exemptions to the military's Covid-19 vaccine mandate for active-duty service members, according to the release.</p> <p>In the Reserves, the Navy has granted nine temporary medical exemptions and nine administrative exemptions to the mandate.</p> <p>The Navy said it has received 3,348 requests for religious exemptions from active-duty service members and nearly 800 such requests from Navy Reserve members. So far, no requests for religious exemptions have been granted.</p> <p>More than 8,000 Navy service members remained unvaccinated against Covid-19 as of Wednesday, according to the release.</p> <p>The Navy's deadline for its active-duty members to be fully vaccinated against the coronavirus was November 28, 2021. It gave Reserve Navy members until December 28, 2021, to do so.</p> <p>In December, the Navy announced it would begin discharging members who refuse to get vaccinated, the same week that the Air Force said it had discharged 27 service members and the Marine Corps said it had discharged 103.</p> <p>The US Army, which is the largest service, just last week announced it will begin separating soldiers from service who refuse vaccination.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/09 Fatal police shootings in 2021 set record
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/2022/02/09/fatal-police-shootings-record-2021/
GIST	<p>Police shot and killed at least 1,055 people nationwide last year, the highest total since The Washington Post began tracking fatal shootings by officers in 2015 — underscoring the difficulty of reducing such incidents despite sustained public attention to the issue.</p> <p>The new count is up from 1,021 shootings the previous year and 999 in 2019. The total comes amid a nationwide spike in violent crime — although nowhere near historic highs — and as people increasingly are venturing into public spaces now that coronavirus vaccines are widely available.</p>

Despite setting a record, experts said the 2021 total was within expected bounds. Police have fatally shot roughly 1,000 people in each of the past seven years, ranging from 958 in 2016 to last year's high. Mathematicians say this stability may be explained by Poisson's random variable, a principle of probability theory that holds that the number of independent, uncommon events in a large population [will remain fairly stagnant](#) absent major societal changes.

That the number of fatal police shootings last year is within 60 of the average suggests officers' behavior has not shifted significantly since The Post began collecting data, said Andrew Wheeler, a private-sector criminologist and data scientist.

"I think the data is pretty consistent that there've been no major changes in policing, at least in terms of these officer-involved shooting deaths," he said.

Advocacy for policing overhauls has intensified since the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer in 2020. More than 400 bills [were introduced in state legislatures](#) last year to address officers' use of force. Police departments increasingly partnered with mental health experts to respond to people in crisis. Cities established civilian review boards for use-of-force incidents.

None of it decreased the number of people shot and killed by officers last year. The total has increased slightly most years since 2015 — a pattern that Wheeler said may or may not signal that fatal shootings truly are trending higher.

Franklin Zimring, a law professor and criminologist at the University of California at Berkeley, said he agreed that the rise in fatal shootings from 2020 to 2021 was relatively insignificant. He noted that the percentage change from one year to the next — 3 percent — was small.

While last year's policing overhauls did not decrease fatal shootings, Zimring said the stagnancy was unsurprising. A policy enacted now, he said, may take years to make a statistically significant difference. "The good news is, things aren't getting an awful lot worse," Zimring said of the 2021 total. "And the very bad news is that they're not getting better, either."

The demographics of the people fatally shot have remained largely constant since The Post started tracking after a police officer in Ferguson, Mo., killed Michael Brown in 2014, gathering information from news coverage, social media posts and police records. Although the FBI launched its own data collection program to track police use of force in 2019, a lack of participation by departments [has put that program's existence at risk](#).

Last year, all but 15 percent of people shot and killed by officers were armed, according to The Post's data. Ninety-four percent were men. Roughly 14 percent had known mental health struggles, down from about one-fifth in the two previous years and about one-fourth in 2016 and 2015.

Sixteen percent of people fatally shot last year were killed after police responded to a domestic-disturbance call. Eleven percent were fatally shot after someone called 911. (Data on racial demographics was too incomplete to provide meaningful analysis. Such data can require additional months of research to finalize.)

Among the highest-profile of the killings after a 911 call was that of Ma'Khia Bryant, a teenager in Ohio's foster system. After two people called police to ask for help, body-camera footage shows, a Columbus police officer arrived and saw Bryant swing at another person's head with what appeared to be a knife. The officer yelled, "Get down!" several times and then fired four shots at Bryant.

The publicly released video prompted local and national outcry, driving hundreds into the streets to protest another deadly interaction between law enforcement and a Black American.

About 20 percent of last year's fatal police shootings were captured on body cameras — the highest portion since The Post began tracking. In 2015, the first year data was collected, body-camera video existed for roughly 8 percent of shootings.

The increase, however, does not seem to have affected the number of fatal encounters. That lack of change may be because officers get used to wearing the cameras and do not act differently because of them, said Nusret Sahin, a criminal justice professor at Stockton University with an expertise in body cameras.

Body-camera video of a fatal shooting also may not be widely viewed. Some states and police departments make the footage public, while others do not, Sahin said. He said it is also unclear how many police supervisors watch the videos and impart discipline for policy violations.

"If you know that this will just be inside your service and will not be released unless there's a high-profile incident or a use-of-force complaint, you wouldn't change your behavior," Sahin said.

Last year also stands out because one of those shot and killed by police was a young child — 8-year-old Fanta Bility. Bility was shot by Sharon Hill, Pa., police officers who fired at a car outside a high school football game in August. The officers mistakenly thought someone in the vehicle was firing at them, a grand jury said. Four people were hit by the gunfire, and Bility died of her injuries.

The three officers involved were criminally charged with manslaughter and reckless endangerment in January. They were later fired from the police force. The shooting marked the third time in the last seven years that police fatally shot a child under age 10. The other children, both 6, were killed in 2015 and 2017.

Of the 1,055 people fatally shot last year, about 1 percent were juveniles — consistent with other years that The Post has tracked.

The killing of Adam Toledo, 13, roiled Chicago last spring after a city police officer chased Toledo through an alley on March 29 and ordered him to stop and show his hands. Video appears to show Toledo stopping at the opening in a fence, turning and raising his hands as an officer shoots once and strikes him in the chest.

Toledo appears to have been holding something in his hand when he stopped running. Police have said it was a gun that they later recovered. An attorney for Toledo's family said he had dropped the gun and put up his hands before the officer fired.

The relative stability of the annual number of fatal shootings does not mean the total is unchangeable. Wheeler said societal interventions, such as new policies around use of force, could shift the total from its expected range.

"The data's consistent with that [range] now," he said, "but that doesn't mean that you can't do stuff to reduce those incidents over time."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 Inflation: rising prices hit in US, world
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/02/09/inflation-rise-prices-consumers-us-world/
GIST	<p>As the coronavirus pandemic enters its third year, families across the United States and even some other nations are feeling the pinch of price hikes of necessities including food, housing and energy, thanks to record-high inflation.</p> <p>This means the cost of living is going up at the fastest pace in decades, affecting the price of things most households need and overshadowing the job and wage gains many Americans experienced last year.</p> <p>Here's a guide to what is inflation — and why it's tricky for governments and central banks to tackle.</p>

What is inflation?

Inflation is a rise in the cost of goods and services. Maybe you noticed higher prices at the grocery store or at the gas pump. Maybe your rent has gone up or your paycheck doesn't seem to go as far as it used to. That's inflation.

In normal economic times, a little bit of inflation is typical. The Federal Reserve, which is in charge of keeping prices stable, wants to see inflation rise 2 percent each year, using their preferred gauge. But the country hasn't seen this level of inflation in 40 years, and many millennials and people in today's workforce have grown up without ever thinking about inflation in their lives.

What does inflation mean for me?

Inflation may seem like a wonky academic concept, but it directly affects the things you buy each day. Steep increases in the cost of housing, along with used cars and trucks, have powered the overall rise in prices. Yet few, if any, parts of the economy have been spared.

Average U.S. rent prices rose [14 percent](#) last year, to \$1,877 a month, with cities like Austin, New York and Miami notching increases of as much as 40 percent, according to real estate firm Redfin. Economists have been especially worried about rising home and rent costs, which can get locked in through long-term contracts and may not improve after supply chains clear up.

The price of gasoline fell 0.5 percent in December after months of steep increases. But in December, gas was still 49.6 percent more expensive than it was a year earlier.

Food costs rose 6.3 percent in December, compared with the year before, as worker shortages and the spread of the coronavirus bedeviled grocery supply chains.

How did inflation start?

One of the first signs of the coronavirus pandemic in the United States was fallout from the closure of Chinese factories that produced key parts for American businesses and key products for American consumers.

Trapped at home by pandemic restrictions, millions of Americans splurged on laptops, furniture and clothing for the work-from-home era. Global shipping prices soared as space grew short on ships.

But supply problems did not begin feeding into higher prices until spring 2021, as countries reopened for business in the wake of widespread vaccinations.

The normally smooth trans-Pacific conveyor belt of goods stopped and started, resulting in supply disruptions that fed on themselves. The most visible example was the chronic backlog of more than 100 massive container ships anchored off the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, waiting to unload their goods.

Such supply disruptions have been especially damaging for the auto industry, which ran short of the [computer chips](#) needed to make modern vehicles. Over the past year, new car prices are up almost 12 percent, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The sticker shock for buyers of used cars is even worse; they're up by more than 37 percent.

What else is fueling inflation?

It's not just the supply chain. There are a lot of things contributing to inflation.

For example, a nationwide labor shortage is adding another layer of costs, making it more expensive for companies to transport goods and hire health-care and child-care workers. Millions of workers have retired or have child-care challenges, with ongoing day-care and school closures, or health concerns with vulnerable family members who remain on the sidelines, no longer in the labor force. That has forced

companies across many sectors to hike the cost of goods and services to be able to offer higher wages to try to woo workers back to the workforce.

Did stimulus checks help cause inflation?

Over the past three years, the government passed four different stimulus efforts, infusing several trillion dollars into the economy.

During the Trump administration, workers got stimulus checks and expanded unemployment benefits of about \$600 a week, as well as paid sick leave, temporarily. Later in 2020, the administration also passed a \$900 billion relief package that financed a new round of stimulus checks, unemployment aid and small-business assistance, among other measures.

But economists are increasingly pointing to the scale and size of the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan — which Democrats passed less than two months after Biden came to office — as too big to fill the economy's hole.

This stimulus re-extended more generous unemployment benefits of \$400 a week, gave many Americans another round of stimulus checks and expanded the Child Tax Credit, though it has since expired. It also strengthened nutritional assistance and school lunch programs.

Many Democrats — except a rare few, such as Lawrence H. Summers, who served under Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama — initially waved off concerns that the spending power of the package could overwhelm the economy and flame inflation. But over time, it became clear that the massive influx in cash that went straight to American households, plus billions more dollars pumped into the broader economy, overheated the recovery.

At this point, it's hard to tease out how much blame stimulus deserves for widespread inflation. But it's a common criticism among Republicans who didn't vote for Biden's stimulus package. And as time goes on, an increasing number of economists concede that the American Rescue Plan was too big to fill the hole left by the coronavirus recession.

Why is housing so expensive?

Housing costs have been pushed up by soaring demand, meager supply — and a different kind of stimulus pumped into the economy.

All over the country, as people have reevaluated where they live and work, families have scoured for new homes. But there are nowhere near enough houses or condos to meet the demand, nor is there enough construction capacity to build new ones. The costs of basic building materials, from lumber to window panes, have soared, while construction crews are bogged down by labor shortages.

Meanwhile, low interest rates have fueled the boom even more. At the beginning of the pandemic, the Federal Reserve slashed interest rates to near zero and flooded the markets with a deluge of financial support. But that easy money, in turn, drove down mortgage rates while driving up asset prices and lifted wealthier Americans who can compete in America's unequal housing boom, often through fierce bidding wars and all-cash offers.

Nationwide, the hot housing market has trickled down to higher rents or has spurred landlords looking to sell their properties altogether. Increasingly, the pandemic-era housing boom has divided those who can afford to stay and those who cannot.

Is food affected by inflation?

Food prices were one of the first things to start rising. At first, it was because of a spike in demand, [with hoarding](#) and massive purchases of items such as flour, yeast, chicken soup and [Gatorade](#), driven by hundreds of millions of Americans being forced to eat most of their meals at home. Foods [packaged for](#) restaurants shuttered for months were orphaned even as grocery shelves [went bare](#).

But prices kept going up in 2021, with many [food manufacturers](#) — including Kraft Heinz, General Mills and Campbell Soup — announcing price increases for 2022, citing the higher costs of ingredients, transportation logjams, labor shortages and higher wages.

The good news is that inflation for some food items, such as poultry and meat, is beginning to slow. But now prices for [fresh produce](#), which had avoided the worst of the price hikes, are also rising because of a greater reliance on imports and higher fertilizer costs on farms coinciding with another spike in demand.

How and when will prices ease?

Federal Reserve and White House officials say they still expect prices to ease back down to a more typical level later this year. But it's unclear how quickly and effectively that will happen while the pandemic maintains its grip on daily life.

In the meantime, many economists say families will probably see a lasting mark on their budgets. The cost of rent, for example, is unlikely to go back down after inching higher over the past year. Groceries or building materials that depend on vast supply chains may not become cheaper until those networks clear up.

Plus, one big challenge for policymakers is Americans' [perceptions](#) of inflation, which can influence consumer spending choices. If Americans expect the cost of goods and services to keep rising, they may be more likely to buy more furniture or plane tickets now, before the price tag stings even worse. That cycle of behavior only pushes prices higher, which can make those very inflation expectations self-fulfilling.

What other countries are seeing high inflation?

Prices are rising everywhere in the developed world. But at an annual rate of 7 percent, U.S. consumer price inflation is higher than in any other advanced economy.

In Europe, inflation hit 5.1 percent in January, the highest level since the euro currency was introduced, more than two decades ago. Residents of Britain are suffering their worst inflation in nearly 30 years, with prices up at an annual 5.4 percent rate. Likewise, you have to go back to the early 1990s to find a period when prices in Canada were ticking up as quickly.

As economies around the world reopened last year, they all ran into similar problems. A mismatch between the goods that could be produced and the ones customers wanted to buy. Global shipping and port headaches. Rising costs for key commodities, including oil.

In the United States, Biden administration officials wanted to make sure they didn't repeat the policy errors following the 2009 recession when the government turned to austerity policies before the economic rebound was complete. So they pumped trillions of dollars into the wounded economy.

That gave the United States the strongest recovery in the world but at the cost of higher inflation than elsewhere.

Even in Japan, where prices have been depressed almost continuously since the collapse of the late 1980s real estate bubble, the central bank in recent days revised upward its assessment of inflation risks for the first time in eight years. Among major economies, only China has a lower inflation rate today than in early 2020.

Meanwhile in Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's unorthodox belief that repeatedly cutting interest rates would lower consumer prices has fueled the rapid depreciation of the Turkish lira. Yearly inflation stood at 36.1 percent at the end of 2021, hitting Turkish households hard with few prospects for short-term improvement.

How are countries responding to inflation?

While some of the trends underpinning inflation — such as the pandemic and a global shortage of basic materials — are having the same effect everywhere, some economists say Americans are seeing more rapid inflation than elsewhere as a consequence of the structure of the U.S. economy and the nature of the lavish financial rescue deployed to fight the pandemic.

“Part of what we’re seeing in the U.S. is very similar to, and echoed in, the rest of the world,” [said](#) Nathan Sheets, global chief economist for Citigroup. “And part of it is unique to our circumstances and particularly to the strength of U.S. aggregate demand.”

In 2020 and 2021, direct government checks drove a consumer spending boom while household balance sheets were also lifted by the U.S. stock market, which outperformed those in Europe and Asia.

Government responses have also varied across countries, although many central banks have already made moves to raise interest rates.

Britain has emerged as an interesting case study for policymakers. As it prepares for inflation to reach or surpass 6 percent in April — just as a cap on energy prices is [due for an update](#) to account for the rising cost of supplying energy — Britain is also raising taxes in a bid to reduce its pandemic-related debt. The Bank of England in December also became the [first central bank](#) in a Group of Seven nation to [raise interest rates](#).

This will put pressure on British households, which are already contending with the higher price of goods, and could [endanger the recovery](#) of the British economy.

Is there government aid available for inflation?

There is no direct government aid for inflation. The Federal Reserve is in charge of keeping prices stable, but its tools are blunt. To rein in inflation, the Fed is likely to raise interest rates from near-zero in March, setting up the first in a series of rate hikes to come this year.

In France, anyone making less than €2,000 (\$2,286) a month in 2021 was eligible to receive a one-time €100 (\$114) [inflation indemnity](#) from the government. The tax-free payment was designed as a purchasing power buffer for 38 million lower-income people “in the face of the sharp rise in the cost of energy,” according to the government.

Other governments have imposed price caps on basic goods to shelter households from the worst effects of inflation. In January, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said items such as sugar, flour and sunflower oil should be [sold at the same price](#) as they were in October, and Serbia is working to extend a similar policy past its February deadline.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 Health officials hopeful and vigilant
SOURCE	https://crosscut.com/news/2022/02/omicron-subsides-wa-health-officials-are-hopeful-and-vigilant
GIST	<p>As COVID-19 case counts come down from the recent omicron peak, many in Washington, including health officials and experts, are starting to wonder if the latest surge could signal the end of the pandemic.</p> <p>But while local public health experts confirm we have new reasons to be hopeful, the way out remains murky.</p> <p>“We are absolutely in a better place today than we were a year ago.... We are making meaningful progress,” said Dr. Jeff Duchin, health officer at Public Health — Seattle & King County, in a recent media briefing. “At the same time, we need to be realistic about where we are on this long and winding road to the post-pandemic state.”</p> <p>In King County, this means that while cases of COVID-19 are going down, they still exceed previous surges, according to data from Public Health. Two years after COVID was first discovered in Washington</p>

state, the recent omicron variant surge has led to a fourfold increase in daily cases and doubled daily hospitalizations in comparison with numbers from the peak of the delta variant.

Transmission levels in King County are expected to remain high for weeks — but not quite as high as they were in previous weeks. That translates to [more than 4,000 new cases since last week](#), which was about half the transmission rate from the previous week. Statewide transmission rates [are also starting to slow down](#) with a seven-day rolling average of just under 17,000 new cases a day, and an average of [1,528 cases per 100,000 people](#).

Local and statewide health care systems remain strained, but hospitalizations are starting to level off, with about 300 people hospitalized statewide as of a week ago, [166 of them on ventilators](#), according to the state Department of Health's most recent count. While omicron is less likely to land patients in intensive care units, hospitals are still facing a nationwide staffing shortage and provider absences. (For this reason, the state Department of Health is currently discouraging nonurgent emergency-room visits.)

As for questions about whether or when COVID-19 will reach endemic status, Duchin has characterized that changeover as “perhaps an academic distinction with minimal practical implications,” one that would rely on the virus becoming more predictable, which it has not. Duchin said such debates are “of little practical value” and, in fact, could be counterproductive if they encourage behaviors rooted in downplaying the risks of COVID-19.

That hasn't stopped some from making early predictions. Ali Mokdad, a professor of health metrics sciences at the University of Washington's Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, said the endemic phase may begin as soon as this spring. “After we go back to our normal level of infections, we will have three to four months of very low infections and mortality and hospitalization,” he said.

The IHME has drawn criticism for previous projections, and is unique in declaring the endemic phase so soon, but Mokdad said high infection and vaccination rates had boosted immunity across the population, and could be bolstered by developments like antiviral treatments and variant-specific vaccines. Mokdad said he expected COVID-19 to become a seasonal virus. But even in that scenario, the risk of a surge would remain, he said, citing the 2017-18 flu season, when 52,000 people died and 41 million were admitted to hospitals.

Predictions that specific aren't widely shared by major public health officials throughout the state. “We're not out of this pandemic, so we absolutely want to make sure that people are taking every available precaution that they can in order to continue to protect themselves,” said Washington state Secretary of Health Dr. Umair Shah.

As the virus continues to evolve — something viruses do while they're still in circulation — there's no way to determine what risks new iterations could present. Future variants could be less virulent than strains like delta, and more transmissible, like omicron.

“But is there a possibility that you could have a variant that is now both transmissible and more lethal or more virulent? Yes, it is possible,” said Shah.

He sees two possible ways out of the pandemic. “One is that we can be transactional — one and done, just as Americans are really good at,” he said. That is: We decide we're over the pandemic, and move on to “the next headline, the next shiny object.”

The other way out — the “transformational” way — demands more effort over the long term. It means taking into account all of the societal issues the pandemic has unearthed — inequities in health care, the cycle of poverty — and making a real commitment to correcting them. “If we are transformational, then this pandemic is not all for nothing.... The question is going to be where we as Americans and our society, where we're going to land,” Shah said.

But there are reasons to be optimistic. Public Health's Duchin said it was reasonable to expect that high vaccination rates, plus recent widespread infection rates, could prevent another major surge, and that these factors, over time, "should lessen the impact of COVID-19 significantly." But in the meantime, he said, it is important to keep up preventive measures. These include things like getting vaccinated and boosted, limiting indoor and crowded gatherings, making improvements to indoor air quality, using effective face masks, and isolating and testing if symptomatic. To support these interventions, the state has committed to distributing [10 million masks](#) and [3.5 million at-home rapid tests](#) to Washingtonians.

And it's not clear what that lessened impact will look like. "We're likely never going to go back to where we were prior to the pandemic," said Shah, but "there will be a new normal and a recognition of the kinds of things that we need to continue to do as we move out of that emergency situation ... into more of an ongoing chronic situation."

This could mean the eventual loosening of state-level regulations to stem the spread of COVID-19/ "Requirements will become strong recommendations," he said. "Strong recommendations will become recommendations. Recommendations will become encouragements." Still, Shah said, while he was optimistic, it's important to remain vigilant.

"This pandemic, just as every other emergency I've been involved with, reminds me that the only truth to an emergency is the fact that it is going to be unexpected, that there are going to be a lot of bumps in the road or unexpected turns that are going to occur," he said. "And if we're not ready to take that on, because we've let our guard down, and said, 'Hey, everything is good, we're fine,' then that's what gets us in trouble."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 Gov. decision indoor mask mandate soon
SOURCE	https://www.seattlepi.com/news/article/Washington-governor-Decision-on-indoor-mask-16846013.php
GIST	<p>OLYMPIA, Wash. (AP) — Washington Gov. Jay Inslee announced Wednesday that starting late next week, elective surgeries can resume in the state and a mask mandate for large outdoor events will be lifted, but said the indoor mask mandate will remain in place for now.</p> <p>However based on dropping COVID-19 hospitalizations in the state, Inslee said he expects to be able to share a date next week on when indoor masking requirements, including at schools, can be lifted.</p> <p>"I agree with CDC that today is not the day to totally eliminate masks, but it is a day that is rapidly approaching," he said at a news conference.</p> <p>Starting Feb. 18, non-urgent procedures — which have been on hold since last month due to concerns about hospital capacity — can resume, since the governor decided to not extend the ban beyond the set four weeks. That same day, the mandate for masks at outdoor events with 500 or more people will lift.</p> <p>Inslee also said that National Guard deployments to help hospitals to assist in non-medical tasks and set up testing sites will draw down soon.</p> <p>Superintendent of Public Instruction Chris Reykdal said in a news release Wednesday he is recommending that the governor and the state Department of Health to change the mask guidance for schools.</p> <p>"As part of the transition from pandemic to endemic, I believe it is safe and timely to eliminate the statewide masking requirement for students and allow for a decision by local health officials," he said.</p> <p>Inslee said he is "on the same page" with the superintendent, but wants to see another week of data before choosing a date. He noted that removal of a statewide mandate will not prohibit local health departments from imposing their own masking mandates if they choose.</p> <p>Washington is one of just a handful of states that still have an indoor mask mandate.</p>

In recent days, Democratic governors in several states have ended or set dates to end masking rules in public places or in schools. The White House has also signaled it is beginning to prepare for a less-restrictive phase of the national COVID response.

“We’re making decisions based on the epidemiology of our state, not other states,” Inslee said.

As of this week, the state had more than 1.3 million confirmed or probable cases since the start of the pandemic and 11,099 deaths.

More than 80% of the Washington population age 5 and older has received at least one dose of vaccine, and more than 72% is fully vaccinated.

As of this week, more than 2.5 million people have either received a booster or a third dose, according to the Department of Health.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 Tonga extends lockdown in capital
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/09/world/asia/tonga-lockdown.html
GIST	<p>Tonga has extended a lockdown in parts of the country, including the capital, until Feb. 20, amid a growing coronavirus outbreak that started among aid workers helping the Pacific island nation recover from a volcanic eruption and tsunami last month.</p> <p>The country recorded its 35th case of the coronavirus on Wednesday, the office of the prime minister, Siaosi Sovaleni, said. Since the Hunga-Tonga-Hunga-Ha’apai volcano erupted on Jan. 15 and the aid deliveries began, Tonga has recorded 34 cases. Its sole recorded case before that had been in October last year, in a quarantined visitor.</p> <p>Tongan officials declared a countrywide lockdown on Feb. 2 after two workers who were helping to distribute aid shipments at the Tongan wharf in Nuku’alofa, the capital, tested positive for the virus.</p> <p>Residents of Tongatapu Island, which includes Nuku’alofa, and of Vava’u District, remain under a stay-at-home order with no access to public transportation and a curfew from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. In the other parts of the archipelago, the lockdown has been lifted, the local news site Matangi Tonga reported on Sunday.</p> <p>Tonga’s disaster recovery has been complicated not only by a growing coronavirus outbreak but a severed internet connection. Repairs to the cable might not be completed until the end of next week, The Associated Press reported on Wednesday. Tonga’s main government website appeared to be down Wednesday evening.</p> <p>To help restore the island nation’s internet connection, a team from Elon Musk’s SpaceX has arrived in Tonga to install antennas that connected to the company’s satellites, an official in neighboring Fiji said.</p> <p>“The Hunga Tonga volcano’s shockwave shattered Tonga’s internet connection, adding days of gut-wrenching uncertainty to disaster assessments,” Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, Fiji’s attorney-general, tweeted. “A SpaceX team is now in Fiji establishing a Starlink Gateway station to reconnect Tonga to the world.”</p> <p>With the internet down and schools suspended, the Tongan Ministry of Education will broadcast home-schooling programming by radio to continue until the lockdown ends, the Tongan government said.</p> <p>Tonga will also distribute 20,000 pa’anga, or \$8,800, in relief assistance to Tongatapu and 10,000 pa’anga, or \$4,400, to Vava’u, as well as 100 pa’anga, or about \$44, to each household to help with power bills, the government added.</p>

	Tonga has fully vaccinated 88 percent of its population of about 107,000 , and given booster shots to more than 2,000 people, according to official data. On Saturday, 10,000 doses of the Pfizer vaccine to be administered as booster shots were scheduled to arrive. And the United Nations children's agency said that it had provided 15,000 rapid antigen tests to Tonga.
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/09 US warns: Russia provoke Ukraine invasion
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/feb/9/state-dept-russia-set-provoke-ukraine-invasion/
GIST	<p>The State Department is warning that intelligence information indicates Russia is set to conduct a covert disinformation operation in Ukraine that will be used as a pretext for an invasion.</p> <p>State Department spokesperson Ned Price told reporters on Monday in releasing intelligence on a potential “false flag” operation by Moscow during the current Ukraine standoff that it would be similar to the ruse the Russians applied prior to the 2014 takeover of Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula.</p> <p>That invasion was preceded by false reports claiming Russians in Crimea were being attacked, including the claim that a three-year-old Russian boy had been crucified by anti-Russian Ukrainians and therefore Moscow had no choice but to invade.</p> <p>Mr. Price said the intelligence suggests the Russians are preparing “to fabricate a pretext for this aggression very similar to what they did in 2014.”</p> <p>“This is why we are so concerned about what we are seeing now and what we know now,” he said.</p> <p>Pressed by reporters to disclose details of the intelligence, Mr. Price, a former CIA analyst, declined to provide additional information, noting concerns about protecting intelligence sources.</p> <p>“Even as we seek to expose Moscow’s efforts, we don’t want to jeopardize or potentially jeopardize our ability to collect this kind of information going forward,” he said. “But when we do the cost-benefit analysis and we consider if the choice is between putting forward necessarily incomplete, sometimes broad, sometimes general information in an attempt to deter aggression, or, on the other hand, if the choice is to keep that to ourselves and potentially not play every card available to us, that’s not a difficult choice.”</p> <p>The objective of releasing the partial information is to deter an attack and, “if we’re not able to do that, to expose what Moscow has had in mind all along.”</p> <p>Mr. Price first disclosed intelligence on the possible false flag pretense for a Ukraine invasion last week. He was challenged by Associated Press reporter Matt Lee for what he said was moving into “Alex Jones territory” — a reference to the broadcaster known for promoting conspiracy theories — without giving the evidence to back it up.</p> <p>Mr. Price then accused the reporter of acting on behalf of Russian propaganda. He later apologized in a tweet.</p> <p>On Monday, Mr. Price said his words were “inartfully” expressed, but added the threat of Russian disinformation efforts is “still very present,” he said.</p> <p>“We have previously noted our strong concerns regarding Russian disinformation and the likelihood that Moscow might seek to create a false flag operation to initiate military activity,” Mr. Price said Feb. 3. “Now, we can say that the United States has information that Russia is planning to stage fabricated attacks by Ukrainian military or intelligence forces as a pretext for a further invasion of Ukraine.”</p> <p>The intelligence stated that a possible option is producing a Russia-produced propaganda video using graphic scenes of false explosions, corpses, actors pretending to mourn and images of destroyed locations.</p>

	<p>“We don’t know if Russia will necessarily use this or another option in the coming days,” Mr. Price said. “We are publicizing it now, however, in order to lay bare the extent of Russia’s destabilizing actions towards Ukraine and to dissuade Russia from continuing this dangerous campaign, and ultimately, launching a military attack.”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/09 Russia, Belarus in joint military drills
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/09/russia-belarus-start-army-drills-threatening-step-ukraine
GIST	<p>Russia and Belarus will begin 10 days of joint military drills on Thursday, setting in train one of the most overtly threatening elements of the Kremlin’s buildup of forces around Ukraine’s borders.</p> <p>Valery Gerasimov, the head of the Russian general staff, arrived in Belarus on Wednesday to oversee the drills.</p> <p>Russia has moved up to 30,000 troops, two battalions of S-400 surface-to-air missile systems and numerous fighter jets into Belarus for joint training exercises with the Belarusian army. Satellite imagery shows much of the hardware has been moved to locations close to the border with Ukraine.</p> <p>The Russian president, Vladimir Putin, reportedly told France’s Emmanuel Macron this week that the troops would leave Belarus when the exercises ended on 20 February. Even if that does happen, the drills show that Belarusian dictator, Alexander Lukashenko, is a firm ally in Putin’s Ukraine policy.</p> <p>“Lukashenko will not be able to resist giving Belarusian territory for whatever purposes Russia needs it, whether it’s marching through, using Belarusian military facilities, airbases, maybe potentially even the air defence system,” said Artyom Shraibman, a Belarusian political analyst.</p> <p>From the border with Belarus, it is only about 130 miles (210km) down a highway to Kyiv, Ukraine’s capital, and the joint exercises add a new front to a potential Russian assault on Ukraine. There is also a threat from the south, where Russia annexed the Crimean peninsula in 2014, and from the east, where Moscow has directed an insurgency against Kyiv’s authority and has massed troops close to the Russia-Ukraine border.</p> <p>When Russia first invaded Ukraine back in 2014, Lukashenko remained studiously neutral, despite the fact Belarus and Russia are theoretically part of one “Union State”. He refused to recognise annexed Crimea as Russian territory, and maintained warm relations with the then Ukrainian president, Petro Poroshenko.</p> <p>Privately, he told Poroshenko he would not allow Belarusian territory to be used by Russia in any attack against Ukraine. When Volodymyr Zelenskiy was elected in 2019, Lukashenko again extended the hand of friendship.</p> <p>“You have never had any problems from the territory of Belarus and with Belarus, you will never have them. We will always be the most kind and reliable of your supporters and partners,” Lukashenko told Zelenskiy in October 2019.</p> <p>Then, in August 2020, huge protests erupted in Belarus when Lukashenko declared an overwhelming victory in a rigged presidential election. The protest movement came within a whisker of toppling his regime, but Lukashenko regained control with a crackdown.</p> <p>After staying silent for some days, the Kremlin eventually decided to back its troublesome ally, offering Lukashenko support and financial backing as most western countries imposed sanctions and refused to recognise the election results.</p> <p>“Russia is slowly trying to extract the price for that support, and we’re seeing Lukashenko do things that he’s always resisted before,” said Nigel Gould-Davies, a former British ambassador to Belarus and a senior fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies.</p>

The announcement of the exercises, which came after Russia had already started massing troops close to the Ukrainian border, was a sign of Lukashenko's willingness to support Moscow. In recent weeks, he has made several demonstrative statements to prove his loyalty is beyond doubt.

"For the west, it's important to drown the Russian-Ukrainian brotherhood in blood," Lukashenko said two weeks ago, speaking in his annual address in front of an audience of thousands. "However much some people might not like it, we will return Ukraine into our Slavic fold."

In an interview this week with Vladimir Solovyov, a pro-Kremlin television presenter, Lukashenko went further, saying that if Ukraine launched an assault on Donbas, he would send Belarusian troops to fight alongside Russian troops to repulse the attack.

"The Belarusian army will act in exactly the same way as the Russian army, it will be a joint response. Do you think we're joking around on the southern border today?" he asked, referencing the joint training exercises. Lukashenko has also recently offered to host Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus.

Shraibman said neither of these things were likely to happen, noting Lukashenko's usual mode was to promise a lot and then attempt to extract concessions. "I think his deeds, actions will always be behind his promises. No matter what he promises to Putin it's not a given that he will actually deliver," he said.

This was illustrated by a recent announcement in Moscow suggesting Belarus would send troops to aid Russian forces in Syria, which was quickly downplayed by Lukashenko. Still, the Belarusian leader's room for manoeuvring has been severely curtailed and he appears to have little choice but to allow Russia's military to use Belarusian territory how it pleases in the posturing against Ukraine.

With backing from Moscow and control over the security forces and army, Lukashenko's domestic position appears secure for now, even as his foreign policy is more and more dictated by Moscow. Most opposition figures have either been jailed or forced to flee the country.

Later this month, he will hold a constitutional referendum, widely dismissed as illegitimate by western countries, that analysts say is meant to pave the way for him to step back from the presidency at some point but retain overall control.

[Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya](#), who stood against Lukashenko in the rigged elections in 2020 and later fled to neighbouring Lithuania, has criticised the joint exercises and Lukashenko's support for Moscow's stance on Ukraine. "Belarusians aren't a threat to Ukraine, the regime is," she said last week, after holding a video conference with several Ukrainian MPs.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 Russia figure skaters hit by doping claim
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2022/feb/09/legal-issue-delays-beijing-medal-ceremony-for-russian-figure-skating-winter-olympics
GIST	<p>A high-profile doping claim hit the Winter Olympics on Wednesday as the medal ceremony for the figure skating team event was postponed because a Russian skater had a positive testing result for a banned substance.</p> <p>The International Olympic Committee postponed the ceremony citing legal obstacles, which had to be settled with the International Skating Union. There was speculation that the continuing legal wrangle is over whether the substance was taken in or out of competition.</p> <p>The skaters, who compete under the banner of the Russian Olympic Committee, won the team gold on Monday. Four Russian skaters did not attend their planned training session on Wednesday.</p>

	<p>The story was first revealed at the IOC press conference on Wednesday. The IOC spokesperson Mark Adams said: “A situation arose at short notice that requires legal consultation,” without providing any details on the nature of the consultation.</p> <p>He continued: “You can bet your bottom dollar we are doing everything that this situation can be resolved as soon as possible. I cannot give you any more details but we will do our level utmost.” He said the ceremony would take place as soon as possible.</p> <p>The legendary Russian coach Tatiana Tarasova denied that any of the Russian Olympic Committee skaters would dope. “This cannot be true,” Tarasova said in response to a question regarding doping allegations. “We can be pointed fingers at, but we are all clean.”</p> <p>The International Skating Union did not respond to a request for a comment on the matter. There was no immediate comment from the Russian Olympic Committee. The Russian Sports Ministry told the Tass agency it was “premature” to comment on reasons for the delay.</p> <p>The International Testing Agency, which conducts tests at the Games, said: “The ITA is aware of the various reports circulating regarding the postponed medal ceremony for the figure skating team event at the Olympic Winter Games Beijing 2022. Any announcement connected to these events would always be publicly issued on the ITA’s website and not commented on otherwise. No such announcement has been published to date.”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/09 Supply chain mess stirs cup shortages
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/shortage-of-disposable-coffee-cups-stirs-an-american-energy-crisis-11644417385?mod=hp_featst_pos5
GIST	<p>On a recent morning, Chelsie Nalley’s go-to Starbucks in Chattanooga, Tenn., left her high and dry. The store had plenty of coffee, she said, but none of her favorite 24-ounce cups.</p> <p>Ms. Nalley called a Starbucks two blocks away and pleaded for a barista to jot her name on a Venti cup before they were all gone. Then she ran.</p> <p>America’s latest shortage is of disposable cups, a potential energy crisis for an up-and-at-’em nation accustomed to caffeine on the go.</p> <p>“They’re always out,” said Ms. Nalley, 29 years old. She switched to 30-ounce Trenta cups until those, too, ran dry. A Starbucks Corp. spokesman said the chain was working to get more. The company said it typically goes through six billion a year, and leftover holiday-theme cups are helping fill the gap.</p> <p>Restaurateurs and suppliers around the country face the same empty cupboard. Disposable cups imported from China and elsewhere are stuck in ports along the mucked-up supply chain. American paper mills are short workers. And the U.S. hasn’t caught up from the extreme cold snap in Texas last year that suspended production of resins used to make plastic cups and the coating on paper cups.</p> <p>At Wetzel’s Pretzels LLC, a California-based chain known for its hot pretzels and lemonade, franchise holders have joined forces to scour the inventory of local restaurant suppliers and whatever is available on Amazon. They send group alerts when they hit pay dirt.</p> <p>“Think about how creative you are in finding a Covid test. It’s like that,” said Jennifer Schuler, Wetzel’s chief executive. Paper-goods suppliers told her they were running at half capacity because they were short-handed, she said.</p> <p>The 350-location pretzel chain has forgone its usual branded cups for whatever generic cup is in stock. In the current state of emergency, any available cup, in Ms. Schuler’s upbeat view, is seen as a cup half full.</p>

“We are like, ‘Yes! We got some cups!’ ” she said.

Khari Parker, co-owner of Connie’s Chicken and Waffles in the Baltimore area, said area restaurants have a handshake deal to share high-demand supplies, keeping track of who owes whom with a promise to square up later.

That has helped, Mr. Parker said. But the cup shortage has revealed a complementary catastrophe—lid scarcity. In this case, substitute goods are spotty. Various lid brands don’t always match cups of equal capacity. One lid that seals a 24-ounce cup might fit poorly on another, risking beverage dribble and customer complaints.

Proper matching has been trial-and-error, Mr. Parker said: “We wait and hope that the top size will fit.” He removes certain drink offerings from online menus when supplies are especially low, reserving containers for in-person customers. He said he also pays more for the cups he gets—\$78.95 for a case of 600 24-ounce plastic cups in January, up 70% from last year.

Some places are fighting shortages and higher costs by selling branded, reusable cups that carry a drink discount. These environmentally friendly options were largely off the table early in the pandemic, restaurant operators said.

Josh Sewell, owner of Cottonwood Coffee Company in southeast Alabama, said he started selling reusable cups at a loss in October, betting they would help reduce his shop’s reliance on disposable cups as the shortfall continues.

Mooyah Burgers, Fries & Shakes, based in Plano, Texas, hasn’t gotten its custom plastic cups since July, said Maria Angles, vice president of supply chain. Mooyah switched to U.S.-made paper cups for its shakes. They work fine, she said, but don’t show off the creamy beauty of blended ice cream the way clear plastic does.

The Plastics Industry Association has forecast a 3.1% increase in the output of plastic products, including cups. Perc Pineda, the trade group’s chief economist, said the worker shortage has hampered plastics plants. Shortages of both labor and inputs have pushed prices for plastic packaging products 24% higher from a year ago, federal data show.

Priscila Hernandez, a 23-year-old social-media coordinator from Anaheim, Calif., said her Starbucks stores routinely run out of cups, lids, coffee stoppers and cup sleeves. She feels pity for baristas—but still, she said, “It is a coffee shop. You would expect them to have cups and lids and things like that.”

Starbucks told investors this month it would likely face supply-chain troubles further into the year.

Froggy Borges, a customer-service representative in San Luis Obispo, Calif., was craving soda with lunch last month, but the office soda machine was out of cups and lids. The supplier sent notice that they had none to sell, said Mx. Borges, who uses gender-neutral pronouns.

Employees used coffee cups until they ran out. Mx. Borges, 30, drank Mountain Dew with a straw from a white cardboard bowl.

“My problem-solving skills were not working at their best when I had not yet had my caffeine,” they said.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 Afghan families hard transition SKorea
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/from-kabul-to-south-korea-afghan-families-make-a-hard-transitioni-miss-everything-11644414357?mod=hp_listc_pos2

YEOSU, South Korea—His pregnant wife must swap traditional Afghan *aush* noodle soup for instant ramen. His oldest son practices swirling taekwondo kicks at night. He has been told he will have to apologize if he leaves work before his colleagues.

“I miss everything about home,” said Najibullah, one of nearly 400 Afghans who relocated to South Korea in August [after the Taliban seized power](#). He asked to be identified only by his first name.

Najibullah, 36 years old, starts an entry-level job soon at a chemical factory in the Seoul suburbs. It’s a new profession in a new land in a new language.

“The work environment seems to be very intense here,” he says. “There’s a lot of pressure.”

For the past five months, he and the other Afghans had been under tight South Korean government control, housed together in coast guard dormitories in the southern port city of Yeosu and enrolled in a crash course on the country’s life, economy and language. The program concluded this week. Now, for the first time, the Afghans are getting a taste of South Korean life on their own.

The transition, following a chaotic uprooting of their lives, looks particularly daunting in largely monoethnic South Korea—where foreigners represent just 5% of the country’s population of 52 million, according to government figures.

The South Korean government chose not to designate the Afghans as refugees but rather as “special contributors,” since the incoming families all had employment ties with the South Korean Embassy or affiliated relief agencies. The aversion to bringing them in as refugees harks back to past controversy. In 2018, the arrival of more than 500 Yemeni refugees brought a hailstorm of criticism, protests and a tightening of South Korea’s already strict refugee laws.

Another hurdle is South Korea’s lack of an established Afghan community, which, excluding the evacuated group, stood at just 837 people as of last year. The Muslim population is estimated to be roughly 100,000 and the country has more than a dozen mosques, according to the Korea Muslim Federation. But South Korea lacks even a single Afghan restaurant, the newcomers have been told.

The potential shocks extend beyond language and culture. South Korea’s gross domestic product per capita is more than \$31,000; Afghanistan’s is roughly \$517, according to World Bank figures. Population density in their new country is nearly 10 times that of their old one. The average age in South Korea is 44 years old—more than double that of Afghanistan.

Tahera Fahimi, 29, just moved into an apartment complex outside Seoul with her husband and young children. In Kabul, where she worked at South Korea’s embassy, Ms. Fahimi lived in a house with a big yard, where she gave no second thought to her children running and shouting. But the weekend passed in her new home with so little noise from her surrounding neighbors that she wondered if they had gotten out of bed.

“Even outside, it’s so quiet,” Ms. Fahimi said. “Here we learned that children are not allowed to run inside the house—otherwise people will call the police.”

Up to half a million Afghans were expected to flee the country by the end of last year, according to United Nations refugee agency’s estimates. The U.S. has vowed to [resettle close to 100,000](#) by later this year, while European Union member states evacuated 22,000 people directly from Afghanistan. Many have tried escaping by land, though neighboring Iran and Pakistan have [taken moves to block an inflow of refugees](#).

The South Korean government evacuated nearly 80 Afghan families, an undertaking dubbed “Operation Miracle.” The intake of 391 Afghans—more than half of whom are children—is relatively small compared with other countries’ efforts.

But unlike relocation efforts elsewhere, largely led by nonprofit groups, South Korea opted for tight government control to assimilate the Afghans.

The more hands-on approach took inspiration largely from how the country deals with [North Korean escapees](#), which total about 34,000 since the 1990s, said Park Beom-kye, South Korea's Justice Minister, who oversaw the Afghan relocation program and visited Yeosu 10 times.

"We were able to provide government housing, medical services and an assimilation program like no other," said Mr. Park. The government plans to support the Afghans with resettlement aid and housing costs for their first year, he added.

The approach brought some apparent benefits: Just two of the Afghan families have yet to find work. One Afghan became a dental-equipment technician. Ms. Fahimi's husband landed a gig at a South Korean mobile-app company. This week, Hyundai Heavy Industries Holdings Co. agreed to employ 29 Afghans—and house more than 150 of their family members in company facilities.

The onboarding strategy has drawn backlash from some South Koreans who wonder why such generosity isn't extended to them, especially for housing support at a time when the country's real-estate prices have soared, justice ministry officials say.

Even with the [developed world's lowest birthrate](#) and a rapidly aging population, the country has maintained a conservative stance on immigration and refugees. Fewer than 1% of asylum seekers to South Korea were accepted in 2020, with just 55 approved out of more than 6,600 applicants, according to the latest government figures.

That, in part, reflects deeply entrenched ethnocentric views. For decades, South Koreans were taught the country's citizens shared a bloodline, conjoining the national identity with a singular ethnicity.

The Afghan assimilation program also drew criticism from local refugee-advocacy groups for isolating the new arrivals away from broader society for months. That left many of the Afghans lacking information about South Korean society, prompting many of them to opt for jobs recommended by the government, rather than seeking roles that match their existing skill sets, said Lee Il, a lawyer who is the chair of the Korea Refugee Rights Network civil group.

"Supporting their families, educating their children, facing discrimination are all new issues they will encounter after leaving the Yeosu facility," Mr. Lee said.

At Yeosu, the families lived in single-room dormitories inside a secluded South Korean coast guard training center surrounded by leafy mountains and adjacent to a golf course. A sign welcoming visitors reads, "The waters we dream of / The future of Korea." The only on-premise commerce was a single convenience store.

On the last day of the government-organized classes, dozens of Afghan children filed into the classroom, the room split in half: boys on one side, girls on the other. "They still refuse to sit together," says Kim Ki-hun, who taught Korean language to the sixth-graders.

Mr. Kim quizzed the children on how to count and how to identify body parts in Korean. He pointed to his head.

"*Meo-ri!*" the class shouted in unison. The students slipped into their mother tongue at times, giving clues to classmates who had forgotten certain Korean words.

Najibullah's list of worries has lengthened as he gears up for his new job and as he awaits the birth of his fourth child. He frets about taking public transportation, getting promoted to technician and comprehending different regional Korean dialects.

	<p>But he has experienced some surprises. South Korea's thanksgiving holiday, or <i>Chuseok</i>, closely resembles Afghanistan's <i>Nowruz</i>, or Farmer's Day, where families often visit their ancestors' graves and prepare special food. His 2-year-old son is already sliding into the local language. After watching months of Korean cartoons, his son now beckons his parents by saying, <i>umma</i> and <i>appa</i>, or mom and dad.</p> <p>"It's not easy to settle down with a family in a different country," Najibullah said, "but it's worth trying."</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/09 Seattle 911 'Nurse Navigator' program
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3342544/seattle-new-layer-911-nurse-navigator-program/
GIST	<p>Seattle's 911 service got a new layer of response this week with the Nurse Navigation Program.</p> <p>Next time you call 911 in Seattle for a medical emergency, you may be redirected to a Nurse Navigator to determine the level of care you require. These licensed nurses will be able to assist in medical emergencies that may not need an ambulance.</p> <p>This is part of the city's new Emergency Healthcare Solution partnership between the Seattle Fire Department and American Medical Response.</p> <p>Fire Chief Harold Scoggins says licensed nurses on these calls can, for example, set up a virtual doctor's appointment, or call for a ride to a hospital.</p> <p>"Some of the chronic issues like abdominal pains or lower back pains that we get a lot of those calls, or mild flu symptoms, or COVID issues related to testing, or vaccination questions, we can transfer those to the Nurse Navigator," Scoggins explained.</p> <p>"We think it's going to decrease the overwhelming of our emergency rooms," he added. "Oftentimes, people go to the emergency room and they have injuries or illnesses that don't need to be in the emergency room, so we can get them where they need to be."</p> <p>Scoggins also says it will free up first responders to deal with more dire emergencies.</p> <p>Similar programs are in place in five other states and the District of Columbia. The Nurse Navigation system in Seattle officially kicked off Tuesday, Feb. 8.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/09 Canada blockade snarls supply chains
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/09/world/covid-19-tests-cases-vaccine#the-canadian-blockade-is-snarling-vulnerable-supply-chains-leading-to-stoppages-for-automakers
GIST	<p>A blockade at the busiest route linking Canada to the United States is further snarling global supply chains, leading to production stoppages and other difficulties for automakers and other manufacturers with dwindling inventories.</p> <p>Automakers, who have already been suffering from a global shortage of semiconductors needed to power their cars, are being particularly affected by the partial shutdown of the Ambassador Bridge, which links Detroit, Mich., with Windsor, Ontario, and accounts for roughly a quarter of trade between the two countries.</p> <p>Ford Motor Company said it had shut down two Canadian plants and reduced production at another as of Wednesday afternoon. Toyota Motor Corporation and Honda Motor Company would likely be closing some production lines later on Wednesday because of border closures, said David Adams, the president at Global Automakers of Canada, which represents both companies.</p>

Mr. Adams declined to specify which plants would be affected, but said Toyota and Honda together had six different facilities in the vicinity that depend on shipments across the bridge. Thousands of trucks cross the bridge daily, ferrying auto parts between major vehicle plants.

“It’s pivotal, certainly, to the automotive industry,” Mr. Adams said.

Both Toyota and Honda operate on just-in-time supply chains that deliver parts to factories as they are needed, giving them enough inventory to operate for about two days without new deliveries before production lines need to slow, he said. Protests over Canadian vaccine mandates began partially blocking off traffic over the Ambassador Bridge on Monday night.

In a statement Wednesday afternoon, Shane Wark, the assistant to the national president at Unifor, which represents Canadian autoworkers, said the protests at the border continued to disrupt work at Unifor-represented auto plants, resulting in short-term layoffs at a Ford engine plant in Windsor, a Ford assembly plant in Oakville, near Toronto, and the Windsor assembly plant of Stellantis, the company that owns Fiat Chrysler.

“The situation is fluid, and changing by the hour,” he said.

“These blockades are creating added hardship on Unifor members and their families in the auto sector, following two years of extraordinary production and supply chain disruptions, and must come to an end immediately,” he added.

In a statement, a Ford spokesperson, Said Deep, said the interruption hurt “customers, autoworkers, suppliers, communities and companies on both sides of the border that are already two years into parts shortages resulting from the global semiconductor issue, Covid and more.”

“While we continue to ship our current engine inventory to support our U.S. plants, we are running our plants at a reduced schedule today in Oakville, and our Windsor engine plant is down,” Mr. Deep added.

In a briefing Wednesday, Jen Psaki, the White House press secretary, said that the blockade posed a risk to auto industry supply chains, and that the administration was also tracking potential disruptions to agricultural exports from Michigan into Canada.

Biden administration officials were in close contact with customs agents, officials in Canada and Michigan, and industry stakeholders to speed traffic and monitor the impact on supply chains, she said.

“We’re working to ensure there’s movement,” Ms. Psaki said.

“I think it’s important for everyone in Canada and the United States to understand what the impact of this blockage is — potential impact — on workers, on the supply chain, and that is where we are most focused,” she added.

Companies have been looking at alternative crossing routes, like the Blue Water Bridge, which links Port Huron, Mich., and Sarnia, Ontario, to ferry their supplies. But a new blockade on a route to that bridge, as well as a surge of diverted cars and trucks, slowed traffic there as well.

Matt Blunt, the president of the American Automotive Policy Council, which represents Chrysler, Ford Motor Company and General Motors, said the protests had already resulted in lost production.

Mr. Blunt said his group had encouraged the Biden administration to reach out to Canadian counterparts. The Biden administration and customs officials appeared to be doing everything they could from the U.S. side to facilitate as much commerce as possible, he said.

	“At some point, if there’s no entry or exit from Canada, there’s not much that can be done,” Mr. Blunt said. “Every day that this shutdown or slowdown persists, it’s going to have an impact on U.S. and Canadian production.”
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/09 China ‘zero-Covid’ policy to Southeast Asia
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/09/world/covid-19-tests-cases-vaccine#if-they-buy-were-alive-if-they-dont-were-dead-chinas-zero-covid-policy-in-southeast-asia
GIST	<p>Selling fruit to China in the pandemic is not for the fainthearted.</p> <p>The country has taken great lengths to keep the virus out. It has screened mail and tested thousands of packages of fruit and frozen foods despite little evidence that the virus can be transmitted through such products. It has locked down entire cities.</p> <p>And its “zero-tolerance” rule has had alarming consequences well beyond its borders, particularly among Southeast Asian fruit farmers, a group that is especially vulnerable because so much of the region’s exports are directed toward China.</p> <p>Long lines of trucks arriving from Vietnam, Myanmar and Laos are now backed up on China’s border crossings. In Myanmar, watermelon exporters are dumping their fruit on the border because truck drivers have been told to quarantine for 15 days before they can bring the goods into China.</p> <p>The restrictions appear to have especially hurt Vietnam’s dragon fruit farmers, who export mostly to China and have been pushed heavily into debt. After nine cities in China said they had detected the coronavirus on dragon fruit imported from Vietnam, the authorities shut down supermarkets selling the fruit, forced at least 1,000 people who had come into contact with the fruit to quarantine and ordered customers to be tested.</p> <p>More than a million Vietnamese dragon fruit, mango and jackfruit farmers have been affected by the curbs, said Dang Phuc Nguyen, general secretary of the Vietnam Fruit and Vegetable Association.</p> <p>“If they buy, we’re alive. If they don’t, we’re dead,” said Pham Thanh Hong, a 46-year-old farmer in Vietnam. “We are growing dragon fruit, but it pretty much feels like gambling.”</p> <p>The exporters do not expect the situation to ease until after the Beijing Winter Olympics. China is also trying to stamp out several Omicron outbreaks at home, which could lead to even more stringent border screenings.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/09 Threats against lawmakers surge
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/09/us/politics/politician-death-threats.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — Early one morning in November 2019, Representative Rodney Davis, Republican of Illinois, received a profanity-laden voice mail message at his office in which the caller identified himself as a trained sharpshooter and said he wanted to blow the congressman’s head off.</p> <p>Two years earlier, Representative Maxine Waters, Democrat of California, received a similar voice mail message from an irate man who falsely accused her of threatening President Donald J. Trump’s life. “If you do it again, you’re dead,” he said, punctuating the statement with expletives and a racial epithet against Ms. Waters, who is Black.</p> <p>Across the country, the office of Representative Ilhan Omar, Democrat of Minnesota, received a profane call from a man who said that someone should “put a bullet” in her skull, before leaving his name and phone number.</p>

The cases were part of a New York Times review of more than 75 indictments of people charged with threatening lawmakers since 2016. The flurry of cases shed light on a chilling trend: In recent years, and particularly since the beginning of Mr. Trump's presidency, a growing number of Americans have taken ideological grievance and political outrage to a new level, lodging concrete threats of violence against members of Congress.

The threats have come in almost every conceivable combination: Republicans threatening Democrats, Democrats threatening Republicans, Republicans threatening Republicans. Many of them, the review showed, were fueled by forces that have long dominated politics, including deep partisan divisions and a media landscape that stokes resentment.

But they surged during Mr. Trump's time in office and in its aftermath, as the former president's own violent language fueled a mainstreaming of menacing political speech and lawmakers used charged words and imagery to describe the stakes of the political moment. Far-right members of Congress have hinted that their followers should be prepared to take up arms and fight to save the country, and in one case even posted a video depicting explicitly violent acts against Democrats.

A plurality of the cases reviewed by The Times, more than a third, involved Republican or pro-Trump individuals threatening Democrats or Republicans they found insufficiently loyal to the former president, with upticks around Mr. Trump's first impeachment and, later, the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol last year. In some cases leading up to Congress's official count of electoral votes on Jan. 6, callers left messages with lawmakers in both parties warning them to keep Mr. Trump in office or face violence.

Nearly a quarter of the cases were Democrats threatening Republicans. Many of those threats were driven by anger over lawmakers' support for Mr. Trump and his policies, including Republican attempts to repeal the Affordable Care Act, as well as the drive to confirm one of his Supreme Court nominees, Brett M. Kavanaugh.

In 2018, for example, a Florida man called the office of Representative Brian Mast, Republican of Florida, nearly 500 times and threatened to kill his children over the congressman's support for Mr. Trump's family separation policy at the southern border.

Other cases had no discernible partisan leanings or were driven by delusion or wild conspiracy theories, such as the belief embraced by QAnon that Democrats are part of a satanic cult.

Overall, threats against members of Congress reached a record high of 9,600 last year, according to data provided by the Capitol Police, double the previous year's total. In the first three months of 2021 alone, the Capitol Police fielded more than 4,100 threats against lawmakers in the House and Senate, straining the law enforcement personnel tasked with investigating them.

"We're barely keeping our head above water for those investigations," J. Thomas Manger, the Capitol Police chief, testified last month. "We're going to have to nearly double the number of agents who work those threat cases."

Threats against members of Congress jumped more than fourfold after Mr. Trump took office. In 2016, the Capitol Police investigated 902 threats; the following year, that number reached 3,939.

The threats range from phone calls with gruesome, specific descriptions of violence that have led to jail time for the callers to broad threats posted on social media for which juries have, on occasion, acquitted those charged.

Each threat is reviewed and "thoroughly investigated," a Capitol Police spokesman said. The reviews include assessments of the potential for targeted violence and the immediate risk to the victim. In some cases, the Capitol Police work in tandem with the F.B.I. to investigate.

Two days after the Electoral College confirmed Joseph R. Biden Jr.'s victory in 2020, Ryder Winegar, a former Navy cryptologist living in New Hampshire, called six members of Congress — both Democrats and Republicans — while heavily intoxicated and threatened to hang them if they did not support Mr. Trump.

In one of the calls, he warned that if a lawmaker did not stand behind Mr. Trump, he would hang them, according to court records. He also said that he would refuse to vote for any “RINO candidate like yourself,” using the acronym for Republican in name only.

In another call, Mr. Winegar said a member of Congress could worry either about being “outed as a racist” or about people like him “stringing” her up.

In Illinois, Randall E. Tarr was drinking coffee and watching television early one morning — either the History Channel or National Geographic, he recalled in an interview — when he saw an advertisement accusing Mr. Davis of turning a blind eye to Russian interference in the 2016 election and encouraging viewers to call his office. Mr. Tarr, an Army veteran who at one time identified as a Republican, was furious.

“I’m like, dude, I got to do this,” Mr. Tarr recounted. “It’s already been proven by our intelligence agencies, the C.I.A. and the F.B.I., and the Russians were guilty of this. I didn’t stop there. I just kept going, which was stupid. Something I shouldn’t have said, I know.”

In the voice mail message, according to court records, Mr. Tarr informed Mr. Davis of his training — “I’m a sharpshooter,” he said — and threatened to murder the congressman.

“That was a stupid part of my call,” Mr. Tarr said in the interview. “I don’t even own a weapon. I just got mad, and I regret it.”

Patrick W. Carlineo Jr., who had been gorging himself on right-wing talk radio before making the call to threaten Ms. Omar, also expressed regret when he appeared before a judge in 2019.

“I was listening to the Glenn Beck show, then I listened to Rush Limbaugh, and they were talking about her on both shows, and I get a little carried away with the coffee in the morning,” Mr. Carlineo said. “I just got all fired up.”

Anthony Lloyd, who threatened Ms. Waters in 2017, told the F.B.I. agents who were dispatched to investigate his call that he also “religiously” followed the news and had grown upset after hearing on talk radio that the California congresswoman had threatened Mr. Trump’s life, a false claim.

“I’m not a planner, I’m not a terrorist guy,” Mr. Lloyd told the agents. “I’m very patriotic and I love my country.”

Most calls have not led to actual violence. But they can terrorize offices, sending lawmakers rushing to cancel events and find security, and traumatizing the aides or even interns who have the misfortune to answer them.

In another case, an aide in Ms. Waters’s district office testified that she answered the phone one morning and received a broadside from a caller who hurled racial epithets and said he would be attending all of the congresswoman’s events and would kill her and “every last one of you that works for her.” The call was so frightening that the aide physically shook upon hearing it, she testified.

Many of the threats, especially those directed at lawmakers of color, contained racial slurs or threats against certain races. Others used the language of white supremacy, like the caller who threatened Senator Richard M. Burr, Republican of North Carolina, and Representative Katherine M. Clark, Democrat of Massachusetts, both of whom are white, and said he would start shooting Black people.

In several cases, defense lawyers have taken to arguing that their client should not be punished for comments that were consistent with what elected officials and political pundits have said. Several rioters who stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6 have employed similar “Trump made me do it” defenses.

When the judge in Mr. Carlineo’s case expressed concern during a hearing that the defendant had referred to Ms. Omar in his phone call as a “radical Muslim” and said that people like her had no place in government, his lawyer cited comments both Mr. Trump and former Vice President Mike Pence had made about her.

In a second case involving a threat against Ms. Waters, the defendant’s lawyer argued that the judge should allow her to explain to the jury that her client’s call came after Mr. Trump had publicly feuded with Ms. Waters, and that the threat had even quoted some of Mr. Trump’s insults about the congresswoman.

In most cases, judges were clearly unsympathetic.

“Just because the current leader in Washington is permitting the type of discourse,” one judge fumed in 2017, when Mr. Trump was president, “that does not mean that it has to be countenanced. Some of this is just vile and threatening.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 Anti-vaccine convoy forms in France
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/09/world/canada-trucker-protest#france-anti-vaccine-convoy
GIST	<p>Dozens of trucks and vehicles left southern France on Wednesday and headed for Paris as part of a convoy opposing the country’s vaccination pass program, a direct reverberation of the trucker-led protests that have engulfed Canada’s capital for nearly two weeks.</p> <p>The demonstrators in France, who include motorcyclists and car drivers, are expected to be followed by similar convoys on Thursday and Friday. The movement’s name, the “Convoi de la Liberté,” is a direct translation of Canada’s “Freedom Convoy.”</p> <p>The French protest was the latest reflection of how the demonstrations in Canada have captured the imaginations of far-right and anti-vaccine groups around the world, which have used social media to call for copycat gatherings in several countries including Australia, New Zealand and the United States.</p> <p>Although the scale of the French protest remains unclear at this stage, the main Facebook group behind the movement has attracted more than 300,000 followers in just a few days. On Wednesday, members began posting images of protesters driving out of Nice, on the French Riviera, or packing food in advance of their journeys.</p> <p>In a 25,000-member group on Telegram, an encrypted messaging app, people posted detailed maps for drivers to reach Paris, including meeting points along the way.</p> <p>Protesters are expected to converge on the French capital on Friday, and some have called for people to continue on to Brussels, the headquarters for most European Union institutions.</p> <p>Supporters of the movement describe themselves as opponents of France’s vaccine pass, a health passport that was introduced earlier this year and prevents people who are unvaccinated against Covid-19 from going to restaurants, theaters, cinemas and other venues.</p> <p>Only about 8 percent of France’s adult population is unvaccinated, and opposition to the pass has been limited, but occasionally intense. Last summer, France experienced widespread, weekslong protests against new health pass policies.</p> <p>Gabriel Attal, the French government’s spokesman, said on Wednesday that the vaccine pass would be removed “as soon as there is a normalization of the situation in the hospitals,” which health authorities</p>

	<p>said could happen this spring. Mr. Attal said that the country was seeing the “beginning of improvement,” with a 35 percent decrease in new coronavirus cases reported over the last seven days.</p> <p>France’s Freedom Convoy has attracted the support of some of the country’s political opposition in France, particularly among far-right and far-left groups.</p> <p>Marine Le Pen, the candidate of the far-right National Rally in presidential elections scheduled for April, said that she sympathized with the movement. She compared it to the Yellow Vests, a 2018 grass-roots movement that started as a protest against rising gas prices before spreading to include a wide array of anti-government grievances.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/09 Convoy-style protest plan gains support
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/09/world/canada-trucker-protest#plans-for-a-convoy-style-protest-in-the-us-gain-supporters-online
GIST	<p>Plans for a demonstration by truckers in the United States similar to the one in Canada appear to be gaining momentum, aided by online supporters.</p> <p>The route and timing of the demonstration, meant to protest pandemic restrictions in the United States, was set to be announced on Tuesday evening, said Brian Brase, a trucker who is organizing the American effort. According to messages posted on social media, the route may start in Sacramento, Calif., and end in Washington, D.C., but Mr. Brase declined to comment on details of the convoy until an official announcement was made.</p> <p>It is unclear how large any such convoy might be, should it come to pass. But anti-vaccine activists have started planning on popular forums on Facebook and Telegram, the messaging app.</p> <p>On Facebook, the hashtag #TruckersConvoy2022 has garnered almost 2 million interactions over the last two weeks, according to CrowdTangle, a data analytics tool owned by Meta, Facebook’s parent company. Private Facebook groups dedicated to the convoy have also seen fast growth, with the main group collecting nearly 150,000 members since it started two weeks ago. A second group, dedicated to the efforts in the United States, has gained 50,000 members in the last week.</p> <p>Meta said it had removed several groups associated with the convoy for violating its rules, and was continuing to monitor the situation. One group had sent people to external sites to buy merchandise. Another group had violated Facebook’s rules by sharing content tied to the banned QAnon conspiracy movement.</p> <p>Over the last two weeks, the activists have shifted from calling for supplies to be sent to Canada, to trying to mobilize and support a convoy of truckers in the United States, according to social media conversations viewed by The Times.</p> <p>Anti-vaccine activists have formed dozens of Telegram chat groups in each state, with many dedicated to specific counties. Members of those groups are trying to build local support and gather supplies for the truckers as they pass through.</p> <p>On Telegram, one California-based group began discussing how to stock food and other supplies for truckers participating. One person offered their property just south of Sacramento as a base, or launching point for the truckers to gather.</p> <p>“It’s time for us to fight this war the enemy has declared,” the person wrote, underneath a post that suggested that the trucker’s convoy in the United States could disrupt everything from postal routes to the supply chain that delivers food to supermarkets.</p>

	<p>Wrote another member of the group: “Brace yourselves, let’s make this big enough so every American feels it.”</p> <p>Mr. Brase, a third-generation trucker who organizes an annual event called Ten Four D.C. that brings big rigs to Washington, said in an interview with The New York Times that the U.S. convoy was meant to show support for American health care workers, police and military personnel who are facing vaccine mandates.</p> <p>“The convoy is for everyone,” he said, “and to support the loved ones of truckers while we are on the road.”</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/09 Germany relaxes Covid rules despite surge
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/09/world/europe/germany-covid-restrictions.html
GIST	<p>After months of having to shop online, Germans in the northern state of Schleswig-Holstein who are neither vaccinated nor have recovered from Covid-19 regained access to nonessential shops on Wednesday, as a number of German states loosen restrictions even with case numbers rising.</p> <p>Though case numbers are at a record level, Germany is recording relatively few Covid deaths and stable hospitalization rates. On Tuesday, the head of Germany’s hospital association, Gerald Gass, said he believed the health system would not be overburdened in the coming weeks.</p> <p>Other states that have eased some restrictions, whether curfews or rules for shopping or restaurants, are Bavaria, Berlin, Brandenburg, Hesse and Rheinland-Pfalz. Masks will continue to be obligatory in stores and indoor public spaces.</p> <p>Germany has recorded a daily average of about 167,000 cases over the past week, according to the Center for Systems Science and Engineering at Johns Hopkins University, well over its previous peak of about 58,000 new cases a day, in November. But the number of deaths has declined by 27 percent over the past two weeks, and the number of patients in intensive care beds is half what it was in December.</p> <p>Officials from the federal and state governments are scheduled to meet next week in an effort to coordinate the easing of rules. This week, Karl Lauterbach, Germany’s health minister, signaled the drawdown of coronavirus restrictions would happen well before Easter, on April 17.</p> <p>A unified approach has long been difficult to enforce, with state governors often acting independently, depending on state infection rates and politics. On Monday, Markus Söder, the governor of Bavaria, announced that his state would not enforce a federal law passed this year that mandates vaccinations for health care workers.</p> <p>On Tuesday, Tobias Hans, the governor of the state of Saarland, called for the law to be dropped altogether, suggesting that medical personnel would otherwise move to states where it was not enforced.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/09 China, Russia in ‘alliance of autocracies’
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/09/briefing/china-russia-alliance.html
GIST	<p>The last time Xi Jinping left China was more than two years ago, for a diplomatic trip to Myanmar. Days later, he ordered the lockdown of Wuhan, which began China’s aggressive “zero Covid” policy. By staying home, Xi has reduced his chances of contracting the virus and has sent a message that he is playing by at least some of the same pandemic rules as other Chinese citizens.</p> <p>Until last week, Xi had also not met with a single other world leader since 2020. He had conducted his diplomacy by phone and videoconference. When he finally broke that streak and met in Beijing on Friday with another head of state, who was it?</p>

Vladimir Putin.

[Their meeting](#) led to a joint statement, running more than 5,000 words, that announced a new closeness between China and Russia. It proclaimed a “redistribution of power in the world” and mentioned the U.S. six times, all critically.

The Washington Post [called](#) the meeting “a bid to make the world safe for dictatorship.” Kevin Rudd, a former prime minister of Australia, [told](#) The Wall Street Journal, “The world should get ready for a further significant deepening of the China-Russia security and economic relationship.”

Ukraine and Taiwan

The current phase of the relationship has its roots in Russia’s 2014 annexation of the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine. The European Union and the U.S. responded with economic sanctions on Russia that forced it to trade more with Asia, Anton Troianovski, The Times’s Moscow bureau chief, notes. China stepped in, buying Russian oil, investing in Russian companies and more.

“The conventional wisdom used to be that Putin didn’t want to get too close to China,” Anton said. That’s no longer the case.

Russia returned the favor in recent years, buying equipment from Huawei, a Chinese tech giant, after the Trump administration tried to isolate the company.

In the grandest sense, China and Russia are creating a kind of “alliance of autocracies,” as Steven Lee Myers, The Times’s Beijing bureau chief, puts it. They don’t use that phrase and even claim to be democracies. “Democracy is a universal human value, rather than a privilege of a limited number of states,” their joint statement read. “It is only up to the people of the country to decide whether their state is a democratic one.”

But the message that China and Russia have sent to other countries is clear — [and undemocratic](#). They will not pressure other governments to respect human rights or hold elections. In Xi’s and Putin’s model, an autocratic government can provide enough economic security and nationalistic pride to minimize public opposition — and crush any that arises.

“There are probably more countries than Washington would like to think that are happy to have China and Russia as an alternative model,” Steven told us. “Look how many countries showed up at the opening ceremony of Beijing 2022, despite Biden’s ‘diplomatic boycott.’ They included some — Egypt, Saudi Arabia — that had long been in the American camp.”

Russia’s threat to invade Ukraine has added a layer to the relationship between Moscow and Beijing. The threat reflects Putin’s view — which Xi shares — that a powerful country should be able to impose its will within its declared sphere of influence. The country should even be able to topple a weaker nearby government without the world interfering. Beside Ukraine, of course, [another potential example is Taiwan](#).

For all these common interests, China and Russia do still have major points of tension. For decades, they have competed for influence in Asia. That competition continues today, with China now in the more powerful role, and many Russians, across political ideologies, fear a future of Chinese hegemony.

Even their joint statement — which stopped short of being a formal alliance — had to elide some tensions. It did not mention Ukraine by name, partly because China has economic interests that an invasion would threaten. The two countries are also competing for influence in the melting waters of the Arctic. And China is nervous about Russia’s moves to control Kazakhstan, where many people are descended from modern-day China.

“China and Russia are competing for influence around much of the world — Central Asia, Africa, the Middle East and South America,” Lara Jakes, who covers the State Department from Washington, said.

	<p>“The two powers have less than more in common, and a deep or enduring relationship that goes beyond transactional strategies seems unlikely.”</p> <p>As part of its larger effort to check China’s rise — and keep Russia from undermining global stability — the Biden administration is likely to look for ways to exacerbate any tensions between China and Russia, in Kazakhstan and elsewhere.</p> <p>The bottom line</p> <p>The “alliance of autocracies” remains informal for now. But it is real, and it extends beyond China and Russia to include other countries — like Hungary, Turkey and Venezuela — that work together to minimize the effect of economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure. The world’s democracies face a growing and interconnected challenge from a very different political model.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/09 Boeing Seafair to return ‘100%’ this summer
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/seafair-return-since-pandemic-began/N4TJOQMQUJBBPPGH5IH4VVDASQ/
GIST	<p>Good news for businesses and restaurants around Lake Washington this summer, as Boeing Seafair is returning since the pandemic began.</p> <p>A full slate is planned for 2022, including the Blue Angels, Fleet Week, and hydroplanes.</p> <p>Organizers said the month-long festivities will kickoff Fourth of July weekend with fireworks at Gas Works Park.</p> <p>In December, the U.S. Navy Blue Angels announced they will return as the featured performer at the Boeing Seafair Air Show in 2022 and 2023.</p> <p>When the team returns to the skies above Lake Washington, they will premiere their new Boeing F/A-18 Super Hornet Jets for the first time in the northwest. It will be the first time in 36 years that the team will be using new jets in Seattle.</p> <p>“Seafair is thrilled to have the U.S. Navy Blue Angels back for another two years,” said Eric Corning, president and CEO of Seafair. “After the past two years that saw so many events be put on hold, we are looking forward to join our community in welcoming back a Pacific Northwest tradition.”</p> <p>Seafair was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the Blue Angels did not participate in Seafair’s in-person events in 2021.</p> <p>The flight box will remain the same as it was during the 2019 Seafair Festival, so the I-90 Bridge and Seward Park will remain open for the weekend.</p> <p>The Blue Angels have performed for nearly 500 million fans since 1946.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/09 Tensions flare at dueling rallies in Kirkland
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/tensions-flare-at-dueling-rallies-in-kirkland-over-homeless-shelter-plan
GIST	<p>KIRKLAND, Wash. — Opposing groups faced off Wednesday on a Kirkland sidewalk over a controversial proposal to convert a former hotel into housing for the homeless.</p> <p>The La Quinta Inn, located on the south end of Kirkland at the border with Bellevue, is being considered as a potential candidate for a King County program known as the Health Through Healing initiative that aims to help the unsheltered get off the streets and into long-term housing.</p> <p>The county has not indicated when it will make a decision on the Kirkland site, located off of Interstate 520 and near I-405, and which will have enough capacity for 121 units.</p>

The county is funding the program through revenue from a one-tenth of a cent of sales tax.

The rally scheduled for noon at the proposed site was scheduled by opponents of the plan, but to their surprise counter-protesters showed up to express their support for the proposal.

“This all should be done in a more open forum,” said Rob Rothe, who lives in Bellevue but works in Seattle, adding that he helped organize the protest rally. “We all do sympathize (and) we have a homeless problem, but we need to do it in the proper fashion (so) that it’s not going to endanger our kids.”

“I’m so excited they’re going to have this in Kirkland. I was hoping when they started picking hotels they’d pick one here (and) we are here to show our support,” said MJ Carlson, a supporter of the site and part of a group of about 25 who want city leaders to know they think the location is ideal. “This is exactly the kind of program that works by getting people into housing so they can be somewhere stable, and then offering them the services they need.”

Both groups seemed to agree that something has to be done about the homeless crisis in the Seattle area.

Some protesters admitted that using hotels makes sense but the divide comes down to location and community input.

Opponents of the Kirkland site and others who work in the suburb insist they did not have any input into the selection process. They said the issue is the hotel’s proximity to nearby Eastside Prep School, which is about 30 feet away from the motel.

The opponents also said they were concerned about the potential for crime and illegal drug activity the shelter could bring.

Others said it makes sense for Kirkland to create a buffer zone for the converted shelters, suggesting they be located at least 1,000 feet from a school.

City and county officials have said they plan to enforce a zero tolerance approach to illegal activity once the converted shelters open. City officials said they will intervene if any issues arise from the shelter.

But supporters say the county plan is the kind of program that will work because it’s a roof over the occupants heads in the form of subsidized housing that comes with support services, case management, medical services and behavioral health support.

Kirkland officials did not immediately respond to requests for an interview with KOMO News.

The county pointed to a written statement issued last week in which is said the purchase of the Kirkland La Quinta Inn is not final and is still under review.

The county has so far purchased eight hotels as part of its long-term shelter plan, including four in Seattle and a facility in the cities of Auburn, Federal Way, Redmond and Renton. But only two of the sites are currently operational.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 As states drop mask rules, CDC stands firm
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/09/health/mask-rules-cdc.html
GIST	WASHINGTON — The White House has been meeting with outside health experts to plan a pandemic exit strategy and a transition to a “new normal,” but the behind-the-scenes effort is crashing into a very public reality: A string of blue-state governors have gotten ahead of President Biden by suddenly abandoning their mask mandates.

Two of the administration's top doctors — Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, the president's chief medical adviser for the pandemic, and Dr. Rochelle P. Walensky, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, both expressed qualified optimism on Wednesday about the direction of the pandemic. If cases continue to fall and no new variants arise, the country “could be heading toward what we would consider more normality,” Dr. Fauci said in an interview.

But Dr. Fauci cautioned that the situation “is still unpredictable,” and said any transition out of the current crisis would be gradual. And Dr. Walensky said pointedly that while her agency is working on new guidance for the states, it is too soon for all Americans to take off their masks in indoor public places.

“Our hospitalizations are still high, our death rates are still high,” she said during a news briefing by the White House Covid response team. “So, as we work toward that and as we are encouraged by the current trends, we are not there yet.”

The gubernatorial frenzy to drop mask mandates comes as the White House Covid response coordinator, Jeffrey D. Zients, and the government's top doctors are soliciting advice from a wide array of public health experts, including some former Biden advisers who have very publicly urged the president to shift course. Mr. Zients referenced the sessions briefly on Wednesday, saying the White House is also reaching out to governors and local public health officials to talk about “steps we should be taking to keep the country moving forward.”

The talks, according to numerous participants, are aimed at drafting a fresh playbook for the delicate next phase of the pandemic, when the coronavirus threat is likely to recede but the possibility of a new variant and another deadly surge remains very real. They are addressing a range of issues beyond masking and mitigation, from how to get new antivirals to people who test positive for the virus to whether to upgrade ventilation systems in schools.

But the slow deliberations, within both the C.D.C. and Mr. Zients' team, are putting the White House in a tough spot. As officials examine the science and chart a careful course, they run the risk of making the Biden administration look irrelevant as governors forge ahead on their own.

“The administration needs to read the room and see that nearly all elected leaders are moving on without them,” said Dr. Leana Wen, a former Baltimore health commissioner who has often been critical of the administration, adding, “No one is expecting the C.D.C. to say that everyone should go maskless right now. What they are looking for are clear metrics on when restrictions can be lifted and when they may need to return.”

Governors have said so themselves. Last week, after a bipartisan group of governors met with Mr. Biden, Gov. Asa Hutchinson of Arkansas, a Republican, told reporters he had emphasized to the president that the nation needs to “move away from the pandemic” and asked him for “clear guidelines on how we can return to a greater state of normality.”

It is now clear the states have decided not to wait. On Wednesday, the governors of New York, Rhode Island, Massachusetts and Illinois joined a growing list of Democrats who have dropped either a general statewide mask mandate or one that applies to schools.

Asked about the moves, Jen Psaki, the White House press secretary, said the president was committed to fulfilling his campaign promise to listen to scientists and follow the data.

“That doesn't move at the speed of politics,” she added. “It moves at the speed of data.”

The internal debate comes as the latest Covid-19 surge, fueled by the highly infectious Omicron variant, abates in much of the country. The seven-day average of new cases was about 253,000 on Wednesday, down from an average 800,000 in mid-January, according to a [New York Times database](#). Hospitalizations are also declining, although deaths, a lagging indicator, continue to rise.

If the drop in cases and hospitalizations continues, as many experts expect, Mr. Biden himself will soon have some tough decisions to make: Should he declare an end to the national emergency that his predecessor, President Donald J. Trump, [declared in March 2020](#)? Should Mr. Biden lift the mask mandate that he imposed for travel on airplanes, trains and buses?

Mr. Biden must be careful to avoid a “mission accomplished” moment. In June of last year, with cases dropping, his advisers began predicting a “summer of joy,” and Mr. Biden himself declared on July 4 that the United States was “closer than ever to declaring our independence from a deadly virus.” Then the Delta variant surged across the country. In late fall, the emergence of the even more contagious Omicron variant also caught the administration off guard.

Michael T. Osterholm, the director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota, said any new strategy must take that into account.

“It has to acknowledge that we are entering a new phase of virus transmission in our communities, being forever mindful that we were in exactly the same place one year ago today, where cases were decreasing from a January peak, vaccines were flowing,” he said. “And look what that got us.”

The C.D.C.’s masking decisions are especially fraught: It is difficult, experts say, to issue a one-size-fits-all prescription for a country as sprawling and varied as the United States.

“It’s a challenging situation, because of course people are really anxious to get back to some sense of normalcy,” said Dr. Celine Gounder, an infectious disease specialist who recently joined Kaiser Health News as an editor at large. “It’s highly variable across the country — how much transmission there is, what vaccination uptake has been — but the C.D.C. produces guidance for the entire country, so it makes sense for them to be cautious.”

Masking has been one of the most contentious issues of the pandemic. Many Republican governors cast aside their mask mandates long ago. Some, like Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida, even banned [mask mandates](#) and threatened to penalize school officials who defied them. The actions drew fierce criticism from Mr. Biden, who directed his education secretary to bring federal civil rights actions to deter states from barring masking in classrooms.

But White House officials have not criticized their fellow Democrats as they end masking rules. Ms. Psaki said there “is a distinct difference between standing in the way, which Ron DeSantis did,” and “allowing for local school districts to make choices, which is what a number of these states are doing.”

Public health experts agree that school mask mandates should not last forever, but are [divided](#) about whether it is time to drop them. The C.D.C.’s [current masking recommendations](#) advise state and local officials to enact indoor masking policies in areas of the country where transmission is high.

A color-coded map on the agency’s website shows the entire country in red; 99 percent of all counties are in a high transmission zone — a point Dr. Walensky underscored on Wednesday.

The public is understandably confused. Several weeks ago, with Omicron infections soaring, the C.D.C. [clarified its stance](#) on various kinds of masks, acknowledging that the cloth masks frequently worn by Americans do not offer as much protection as surgical or respirator masks. A few days later, Mr. Biden announced his administration would distribute 400 million high-quality N95 masks free to the public.

Now, several experts said, the agency must quickly come up with metrics for when masking and other mitigation measures should be relaxed — and when they should be reinstated. Dr. Wen spoke of an “offramp” and an “on ramp” for mitigation measures, and said two factors are critical: whether hospitals and intensive care units have sufficient capacity, and whether vaccines and boosters are protecting well against severe disease.

“The offramp for restrictions needs to be their top priority, because this is what individuals, businesses, state and local officials are thinking about every day,” she said.

Drs. Wen, Gounder and Osterholm are on a long list of experts with whom the White House has recently consulted. None of the participants would describe the discussions, except to say that the administration officials participating — including Dr. Vivek H. Murthy, the surgeon general; Dr. Fauci; and Dr. David A. Kessler, the science adviser for the Covid response — did more listening than talking.

The meetings with outside experts appear to have been prompted by a trio of articles published in January in the Journal of the American Medical Association, in which six former Biden transition advisers urged the administration to take a longer view and begin drafting a pandemic playbook aimed at “the new normal.”

The effort was led by Dr. Ezekiel Emanuel, an oncologist and medical ethicist who advised former President Barack Obama. In the first article, Dr. Emanuel, Dr. Gounder and Dr. Osterholm, an epidemiologist at the University of Minnesota, wrote that the United States must avoid becoming stuck in “a perpetual state of emergency.”

To be better prepared for inevitable outbreaks — including from new coronavirus variants — they suggested that the administration lay out goals and specific benchmarks, including what number of hospitalizations and deaths from respiratory viruses, including influenza and Covid-19, should prompt emergency mitigation and other measures.

Mr. Biden has already been signaling that he is looking past the pandemic. In [remarks at a news conference in mid-January](#), he said that the nation is “moving toward a time when Covid-19 won’t disrupt our daily life, when Covid-19 won’t be a crisis, but something to protect against.” But the president also said then that “we’re not there yet.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 British PM plans lifting all virus restrictions
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/09/world/europe/uk-covid-restrictions-johnson.html
GIST	<p>Prime Minister Boris Johnson of Britain outlined plans on Wednesday to lift remaining coronavirus restrictions within weeks, including the legal requirement for those who test positive to isolate.</p> <p>Speaking in Parliament, Mr. Johnson — who is fighting to save his job after a scandal over lockdown parties — said he expected England’s last domestic pandemic rules to end about a month earlier than previously planned, as long as a decline in the number of cases and hospital admissions continued.</p> <p>The restrictions were scheduled to expire on March 24, but Mr. Johnson said he intended to come to Parliament later this month to present a new strategy on living with Covid.</p> <p>“Provided the current encouraging trends in the data continue, it is my expectation that we will be able to end the last domestic restrictions — including the legal requirement to self-isolate if you test positive — a full month early,” he said.</p> <p>Mr. Johnson gave no further details, nor did he say whether, under his new plan, those who tested positive would still be asked — rather than obliged by law — to avoid contact with others. However, Downing Street later made clear that those who knew they had contracted the virus would still be officially urged by the government to stay away from work and to avoid infecting others.</p> <p>That would be similar to the legal situation that currently applies to the use of face masks. Though they are no longer required by law in England, the government still publishes guidance suggesting their use in crowded and enclosed spaces.</p> <p>It was unclear whether or when such rule changes would apply to Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, which make their own coronavirus rules.</p>

Given his precarious political position, Mr. Johnson might have struggled to persuade his own backbenchers to agree to any extension of the legal requirement to self-isolate, with fines for those who break the rules. So, as well as cheering some of his more libertarian critics, Mr. Johnson's announcement on Wednesday averts the prospect of a rift with sections of his party at a time of acute danger for the prime minister.

However, some public health experts worry that the change in isolation rules Mr. Johnson wants to make will send mixed messages to a public that has generally complied with restrictions.

"If you have an infectious disease the advice is to stay away from other people and that is what we should be trying to encourage, particularly because we know that this virus is highly problematic for people who are immuno-compromised," said Gabriel Scally, a visiting professor of public health at the University of Bristol and a former regional director of public health.

The government's new stance allowed it to say to its more libertarian backbenchers that all restrictions were being lifted, while still arguing that its guidance stressed caution, he said. "At the moment the messaging has become more clouded," Dr. Scally added.

In the United States, by comparison, there has been no federal law requiring isolation, just a recommendation by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that people who have Covid isolate.

It is unclear whether Mr. Johnson would lift all travel restrictions, though these are already being eased significantly. Starting Feb. 11, fully vaccinated travelers will not have to take a test before or after arrival, or quarantine in England, though they will have to complete a locator form. [Those who are not vaccinated will have to take tests before and after they arrive.](#)

Though the news on coronavirus is encouraging, Britain's latest daily figures still showed 68,214 new reported cases, 1,196 hospital admissions and 276 fatalities within 28 days of a positive test.

Wednesday's announcement is likely to please a vocal contingent of Conservative lawmakers who opposed lockdowns, and it was welcomed by Steve Baker, who is deputy chair of an informal grouping of those hostile to coronavirus restrictions known as the Covid Recovery Group.

There was a cooler response to Mr. Johnson's announcement from the opposition Labour Party. "As always we would want to see what the scientific advice on this is," said Justin Madders, a Labour lawmaker.

"Obviously we have only heard what the prime minister said today, and we know he has motivations which are nothing to do with the science and all to do with protecting his political position," he told the BBC.

Mr. Johnson needs to raise the morale of his backbenchers after weeks of political turmoil over claims that the country's previous strict coronavirus rules, forbidding social gatherings, were broken in Downing Street by him and other people who made them.

He would face a no-confidence vote if 54 of his colleagues demand one; more than a dozen have publicly called on him to quit. Many more are reserving their judgment until after the publication of a full inquiry into reports of lockdown-breaking parties in Downing Street that are being investigated by the police.

On Wednesday [a new photo](#) surfaced showing Mr. Johnson taking part in a virtual pre-Christmas quiz close to what appears to be an open bottle of sparkling wine or champagne and a packet of potato chips. The Metropolitan Police said they would review the decision not to investigate the event, which took place in 2020, and which had previously been deemed insufficiently serious to consider as part of their inquiry.

HEADLINE	02/09 Immunize young children now or wait data?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/09/world/covid-19-tests-cases-vaccine#the-next-vaccine-debate-immunize-young-children-now-or-wait-for-more-data
GIST	<p>Scientific advisers to the Food and Drug Administration will decide next week whether to endorse giving two doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine to children 6 months to 4 years of age, before clinical trials have shown whether a full course of three doses is effective. Such an authorization would be a first for the agency, many experts say.</p> <p>Interim results suggested that two doses of the vaccine did not produce a strong immune response in children aged 2 through 4. Results from trials of the third dose are expected in a few weeks.</p> <p>The companies applied for authorization for the two doses at the urging of the F.D.A., which was also highly unusual.</p> <p>The fast-moving pandemic has forced federal health officials to make important decisions with limited data before, and they argue that it's important to begin vaccinating young children now, before a new, potentially more dangerous variant arrives.</p> <p>But the agency's review of incomplete data as a basis for authorization has alarmed some experts.</p> <p>"We've never done that before, that's what gives me some pause," said Dr. Gregory Poland, founder and director of the Mayo Vaccine Research Group in Minnesota and editor in chief of the journal Vaccine. "I don't like that there isn't more data."</p> <p>The third dose is likely to build up immunity in young children, Dr. Poland and several other experts said, but it is not guaranteed to do so. With the ebbing of the Omicron surge, many scientists feel the agency could afford to wait for results on the third shots, which are expected in just a few weeks.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/09 Confusion, patchwork over policy rollbacks
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/09/us/mask-mandates-by-state.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article
GIST	<p>CHICAGO — New York's governor said on Wednesday that she was ending the state's indoor masking rules. The governor of Massachusetts announced that face coverings would soon become optional in schools. And by day's end, the governors of Illinois, Rhode Island and Washington said that they, too, would loosen coronavirus rules.</p> <p>The moves, which came rapid fire, one after another, mean that many of the Covid-19 restrictions that have divided Americans will soon be eliminated in places where politicians have long championed sweeping virus precautions. But as the Omicron variant loosens its grip, and as polling shows Americans exhausted with the pandemic, leaders in liberal-leaning states are shifting to a new approach, moving toward an engage-at-your-own-risk stance that many conservative areas embraced a year ago.</p> <p>"Numbers are coming down, and it is time to adapt," said Gov. Kathy Hochul of New York, a Democrat who said she was letting expire a state requirement that businesses seek proof of vaccination or require masks at all times in indoor public spaces.</p> <p>The decisions add to the confusion and patchwork nature of what Americans can and cannot do. While some people welcomed them as a relief and part of a return to normal life, others asked whether states were moving too fast at a time when more than 200,000 new infections were being announced each day and when the country was reporting more than 17,000 deaths a week, more than at any other point in the pandemic except last winter.</p>

“It’s time to give our kids a sense of normalcy,” said Gov. Charlie Baker of Massachusetts, a Republican, announcing that he would let school mask rules expire at the end of February.

But in California, Barbara Ferrer, the top public health official in Los Angeles County, expressed her concern to elected officials this week: “We should not be lifting the masking mandate when we are reporting thousands and thousands of new cases every day. That doesn’t make sense.”

Even as governors were lifting rules, officials in some cities, counties and school districts indicated that they would keep their own mandates in place, adding new complications to an already confusing array of rules across the country.

That divide was especially stark in California, which is set to end an indoor mask mandate for vaccinated people in most public settings this month, but where counties are allowed to keep their own stricter measures. Health officials in some counties, including Marin, Orange, Sacramento, San Francisco and San Diego, pledged to lift strict local rules when the state does. Other counties — including Los Angeles and Santa Clara — said they would not ease restrictions until rates of vaccination, transmission and infection had improved.

In New York, Ms. Hochul’s decision did not supersede virus restrictions enacted by local governments, including New York City’s requirement to show proof of vaccination to eat inside restaurants, exercise in a gym or watch a movie at a theater.

For Americans who have chafed at wearing masks, the wave of rule lifting was welcome. It felt like a hopeful sign, they said, or at least a pragmatic acknowledgment that masks would not stomp out the virus.

“I feel like if you feel safer wearing it, then you should continue to wear it, but if you don’t want to, you shouldn’t have to,” said Natalie Koteles, who is vaccinated and works for an accounting firm in downtown Chicago.

Ms. Koteles said the application of mask rules felt arbitrary at times, even silly. She had to wear a face covering while walking into her workplace, but not while at her desk. They are required when entering restaurants, but not while eating. “The rules are totally inconsistent,” she said.

For others, though, the change seemed jarring, premature, dangerous. How had we gone in just weeks from a fearsome Omicron surge and added cautions to a quick retreat? And what about immunocompromised people who might not be well protected by vaccines, or the youngest children who are still not eligible for shots?

“They seem to not grasp the gravity of what Covid can do to our family,” said Stephanie Madole, whose school-age daughters in Redding, Calif., are immunocompromised.

Ms. Madole said her older daughter had struggled to understand why masks would now be optional. “She asked, ‘Why don’t people want to protect me?’ And I couldn’t answer that question for her,” said Ms. Madole, who now plans to home-school her children.

The abrupt shift in policy began to play out last week, when members of the National Governors Association asked President Biden to provide clear guidelines for their states to move on from the crisis response and to recognize that the virus was here to stay, and that it could be managed without completely upending daily life.

As of last week, nine states, all with Democratic governors, had statewide mask mandates in place. Several other states had local mask mandates, or mandates that only covered schools.

On Monday, Gov. Phil Murphy of New Jersey, a Democrat, announced that he would no longer require students and school employees to wear masks, contradicting the current recommendations of the Centers

for Disease Control and Prevention. Other Democratic governors in California, Connecticut, Delaware and Oregon quickly moved to lift some mask mandates.

Federal officials have moved more cautiously, meaning many Americans are receiving clashing guidance from different levels of government. The White House has been meeting with outside health experts to plan a pandemic exit strategy and a transition to a “new normal,” but Dr. Rochelle P. Walensky, the director of the C.D.C., said on Wednesday that while Covid-19 caseloads were dropping across the country, it was not yet time to lift mask mandates.

The country’s virus outlook has improved significantly in recent weeks, with daily case reports dropping by more than two-thirds since reaching a peak of more than 800,000 a day in January. Hospitalizations have also plummeted from record levels seen last month; daily death reports, too, appear to be plateauing.

In New York City, Cleveland, Washington, D.C., and other places hit first by the Omicron variant, case numbers have returned to levels from before the most recent surge.

Even as governors moved to loosen rules in recent days, they stopped short of declaring victory over the virus. New variants and surges remain a distinct possibility, and scientists have said that the virus will become endemic, meaning it will circulate indefinitely at lower levels.

“What we’re talking about now is far different from where we were two years ago,” said Rhode Island’s interim health director, Dr. James McDonald. He said Covid-19 was about to become an endemic disease, “and we have to find a new balance.”

Bob Smoler, a high school math teacher in Connecticut, said he remained well aware of ongoing risks, even as he welcomed a less restrictive approach announced in that state this week.

“Obviously, I won’t have to be a mask policeman anymore and tell kids, ‘Put your mask on,’” Mr. Smoler said. “It’s a return to normalcy.”

In Sacramento, Graham Williams, a retired banker, said he believed that his state’s decision to end some restrictions showed that leaders were following the science; California is averaging about 36,000 new cases a day, down 67 percent in the past two weeks.

“I think the collective action that’s necessary has been taken,” Mr. Williams said. “And the effectiveness of mask mandates, as opposed to individual decisions, is not as clear-cut as we’d all like it to be.”

The details and timelines of the policy rollbacks varied widely from place to place.

In Illinois, Gov. J.B. Pritzker said he planned to lift indoor mask rules in most places, though not schools, at the end of February if hospitalizations continued to drop. In Washington, Gov. Jay Inslee said that next week he would end the state’s outdoor mask mandate and announce an update on its indoor mandate, while Oregon officials said masking rules would be lifted by the end of March. And in Rhode Island, Gov. Dan McKee said he would lift his order on masking in schools in early March and in most other settings this week.

Still, some questioned the timing. Joe Basilone, a coffee shop owner in Chicago, said it all felt too early to him. He said he planned to continue asking his employees to wear masks after the mandate lifted, but would not require it for customers.

“I mean, am I tired of wearing a mask? Sure, I am,” Mr. Basilone said. “We’ve been doing it for over two years now. But I still have the mind-set that it creates safety for people who might have compromised immune systems. My concern is that it might again be jumping the gun here.”

City leaders who have instituted restrictions more stringent than those imposed by their states have also begun to re-evaluate their policies. In Boston, Mayor Michelle Wu laid out benchmarks on Tuesday for

	<p>when the city would lift proof-of-vaccine requirements if hospitalizations and case numbers continued to fall. In Denver, health officials said masks would become optional in schools later in February. And in Duluth, Minn., Mayor Emily Larson said she would allow a mask mandate imposed last month near the height of the Omicron surge to expire on Saturday.</p> <p>“There are still new strains and personal choices as it relates to vaccination,” Ms. Larson said. “This leaves us all vulnerable and open to future infection and pandemic realities. And to me, that’s another reason to allow this to expire — it’s my personal feeling that we are now moving into not how we beat Covid-19, but how we coexist with it.”</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/09 DOH: 1,391,026 cases, 11,194 deaths
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/coronavirus/article258229958.html
GIST	<p>The Washington state Department of Health reported 10,252 new COVID-19 cases Wednesday.</p> <p>The state reported 7,512 new cases on Tuesday. As of Wednesday, the state’s preliminary death tally was 11,194. That number is up by 95 since Monday.</p> <p>The confirmed death tally as of Jan. 23 was 10,837 The statewide case total from the illness caused by the coronavirus stood at 1,391,026 cases on Wednesday.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/09 Seattle police hiring bonuses not funded
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/politics/unfunded-seattle-police-hiring-bonuses-continued-last-month-contrary-to-city-council-vote/
GIST	<p>On her last business day in office, a newly released document shows, outgoing Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan told the city’s police chief and 911 call center director that they should continue using bonuses to hire police officers and dispatchers this year, though the City Council had voted to stop the bonuses effective Dec. 31.</p> <p>And that’s exactly what happened after Durkan outlined her stance in a Dec. 30 memo to interim Chief Adrian Diaz and Director Chris Lombard. Five police officers and at least 13 dispatchers were hired with bonuses in January, according to an email from new Mayor Bruce Harrell’s administration to Councilmember Lisa Herbold on Feb. 4.</p> <p>But the January bonuses weren’t budgeted for by City Hall.</p> <p>Though Durkan also notified the Harrell administration about her view in a separate Dec. 30 memo, the administration missed the message and didn’t realize until late January that bonuses were still being granted, Deputy Mayor Monisha Harrell wrote in the email to Herbold, the council’s public safety committee chair.</p> <p>The Seattle Police Department and the city’s Community Safety Communications Center “have continued to offer incentive bonuses throughout the entire month of January, unbeknown to me, Mayor Harrell, or, as far as I’m aware, any member of the Harrell administration,” the deputy mayor wrote.</p> <p>“I have since directed both SPD and CSCC to cease offering the supposedly sunsetted bonuses immediately and to withdraw any related advertising and communications. Council was clear in its intent and had the legal authority to do so.”</p> <p>Now the Harrell administration and the council need to sort out whether the council’s authority was violated and, potentially, how to pay for the January bonuses. The Harrell administration didn’t immediately Wednesday share how much money was promised or awarded in bonuses last month.</p>

Durkan didn't immediately return a request for comment late Wednesday.

The Harrell administration learned about Durkan's directives on Jan. 27, and learned bonuses were still being offered on Jan. 28, Jamie Housen, a spokesperson for the mayor, said Wednesday.

"This new information directly conflicted with how the Durkan administration had previously briefed the incoming Harrell administration on these bonuses," Housen said.

Apart from what's already happened, the new administration and the council need to discuss whether to offer hiring incentives to police officers, 911 dispatchers and other city employees in the future, Herbold said. An analysis on the issue is due soon. Harrell hasn't yet said what he wants to do moving ahead.

The mess stems from a debate months ago.

Durkan and most council members were on the same page in 2019, when they worked together to authorize bonuses for new officers on a temporary basis. But that program ended during the pandemic. When Durkan sought to relaunch the strategy last fall, she argued that the bonuses were necessary to address urgent staffing shortages. A number of council members objected.

Rather than wait for the council to include or not include the bonuses in the 2022 budget, Durkan issued [an emergency order](#) on Oct. 29 authorizing bonuses of up to \$10,000 for new recruits and up to \$25,000 for transfers from other jurisdictions.

Almost a month later, on Nov. 22, the council voted 8-1 to pass a resolution [amending](#) Durkan's emergency order — capping the bonus spending at \$500,000 and setting a Dec. 31, expiration date for the recruitment tool.

In her Dec. 30, memo to Diaz and Lombard, Durkan wrote: "Based on consultations with legal counsel, it has been concluded that the City Council's actions to limit the Emergency Order were not effective. Thus, you should continue to hire and implement the terms of the Order, until incoming Mayor Harrell or the City Council effectively ... extend or alter the terms of the Order."

In Durkan's Dec. 30 memo to Harrell, she cited a clause in her emergency order that said, "The Council shall endeavor to act on any order within 48 hours of its being presented to the Council by the Mayor."

Durkan wrote in the memo to Harrell, "Based on consultation with legal counsel, it was concluded that Council's failure to act on my Emergency Order in the time frame imposed by ordinance renders their actions ineffective as they did not endeavor to act within 48 hours as required by law."

In an interview Wednesday, Herbold called Durkan's 48 hours argument "absurd," highlighting the meaning of the words "endeavor to."

"The Law Department has told us they did not give her any advice," or at least not that advice, Herbold said.

Durkan's memos were sent at 6 p.m. on Dec. 30 (Dec. 31 was a city holiday), Monisha Harrell wrote in her Feb. 4 email, saying she missed the message.

"It was my belief (as per all the information provided to us by the outgoing Executive's team via transitional in-person briefings and prior written documentation) that the incentive pay was ending on December 31st. I should have verified the Departments understanding of the same after we entered office," she wrote.

In a slide show transition presentation to the Harrell administration on Nov. 24, just two days after the council vote, Durkan's team explicitly noted the incentives would end on Dec. 31 and were not funded in

	<p>the 2022 budget, according to a document shared Wednesday. In the same slide, she advised Harrell to “renew” the incentives on Jan. 1, “to avoid [a] chilling effect.”</p> <p>Housen said that between the slide acknowledging the end of the incentives and multiple verbal discussions afterward, the Harrell administration had no reason to believe Durkan was planning to override the council’s decision, until the last minute memo.</p> <p>“We would like to work with Council to find a way to retain these new hires and pay them the incentives offered to them in their hire letters,” Monisha Harrell added in her email about what she called “this entire unfortunate situation.”</p> <p>Proceeding as if the council’s resolution never passed could threaten the council’s authority, but withdrawing the January bonuses could be a legal risk, Herbold said. City Hall needs to chart a path forward that addresses both of those concerns, she said.</p> <p>Harrell could theoretically issue his own emergency order for bonuses, Herbold noted. Housen said the mayor “will continue to work with Council on future strategies to improve SPD, CSCC and citywide staffing.”</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/09 WA ends outdoor mask mandate next week
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/politics/wa-gov-inslees-office-having-talks-about-when-to-lift-the-states-mask-requirements/
GIST	<p>OLYMPIA — Washington Gov. Jay Inslee said Wednesday that he expects next week to announce some details for when the state will end COVID-19 emergency mask requirements that cover schools and businesses.</p> <p>In a Wednesday news conference, Inslee also announced that an outdoor mask requirement for people at gatherings of 500 or more would end effective Feb. 18.</p> <p>And the governor announced an end to the pause of elective surgeries starting that same day, as hospitalization levels for the virus continue to trend downward. Additionally, the Washington National Guard will no longer be needed to help in those facilities, he said.</p> <p>Washington’s masking requirements for K-12 schools and indoor public spaces and businesses remain in effect for now.</p> <p>But, “I believe we will be in a position next week to be able to announce that date,” Inslee said. “I think that would be helpful for Washingtonians to have a goal and helpful for them to do whatever planning is necessary for that transition.”</p> <p>The discussion on winding down emergency COVID orders comes after states such as New Jersey, New York, Oregon and California have begun announcing the end of various mask requirements.</p> <p>Throughout the pandemic, Republican state lawmakers have pushed back against the governor’s orders and his use of emergency powers — and those critiques continued Wednesday.</p> <p>“It’s very disappointing that the governor chose only to announce an end to the outdoor mask mandate — something most people had forgotten even existed,” Senate Minority Leader John Braun, R-Centralia, said in a statement. He added that California and Oregon have both already made announcements on masking.</p> <p>“Somehow the science is different ... here?” Braun said. “I don’t know if he is indifferent or just unprepared. Come on, governor the people of Washington deserve more.”</p>

The governor's office doesn't have a specific set of public-health metrics to decide for lifting mask requirements, Inslee spokesperson Mike Faulk wrote in an email earlier on Wednesday.

"But we are particularly attentive to the health care system and hospitalizations," Faulk wrote.

The governor has instituted some of the strictest public-health measures in the nation to tamp down the coronavirus, including a requirement that masks be worn in public places.

In August as the delta variant of the virus surged, [Inslee reimposed a statewide mask mandate](#) for most indoor spaces in public.

In September, the governor [announced a mask requirement for outdoor gatherings](#) of 500 or more people. Even before those announcements, masks have been a requirement for students and workers [in K-12 schools](#).

In a statement Wednesday, Washington state Schools Superintendent Chris Reykdal called on Inslee and the state Department of Health [to allow local health districts to make decisions on masking](#).

"As part of the transition from pandemic to endemic, I believe it is safe and timely to eliminate the statewide masking requirement for students and allow for a decision by local health officials," Reykdal said in prepared remarks. "I recommend the Governor and Department of Health change the guidance to reflect this in the coming weeks."

On Wednesday, more than a dozen House Republican lawmakers sent the governor a letter calling on him to end mask orders and vaccine mandates for government, school and health care workers.

"From all corners of Washington, people — including school students — are demanding an end to indoor-mask requirements," [according to the letter by Rep. Jim Walsh, R-Aberdeen](#), and others. "They offer compelling testimony about the problems mask mandates and other restrictions cause in their lives, work and studies."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 King Co. pushes for end to concrete strike
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/king-county-pushes-for-end-to-monthslong-concrete-strike/
GIST	<p>As a monthslong concrete-mixer driver strike threatens government projects and thousands of construction jobs, King County officials hope an exclusive multimillion-dollar proposal can jump-start talks between six Seattle-area concrete companies and their unionized workers.</p> <p>The county is soliciting bids from concrete companies to become the county's exclusive suppliers for at least three years. The catch: to qualify, companies need a union contract with their workers.</p> <p>"My sincere hope is that by having the opportunity to really secure the business for themselves — \$30 million over the course of next three years, much more in the future — that they will understand that there are larger issues and really more money at stake than what's represented in the relatively minor differences between the Teamsters and concrete companies in this negotiation," said County Executive Dow Constantine, one of many local officials anxious for an end to the strike.</p> <p>The proposal, unveiled Wednesday, represents a last-ditch effort to end the strike, which is creating costly delays on taxpayer-funded roads, light rail lines and other projects.</p> <p>The agreement would secure a steady supply of concrete for the county, Constantine said, while also pushing the companies to reach a deal with the Teamsters Local 174, who represent around 300 truck drivers. Some industry insiders think the offer is also meant to drive a wedge between the companies, if one or more are willing to settle with the union to get the county deal. But others wonder if the dollars on offer are too small to move the needle.</p>

The concrete companies had not commented on the morning announcement by the end of the day Wednesday. The Teamsters welcomed it.

“Our fingers are crossed that this will be the motivation these companies need to come back to the table and talk to us,” spokesperson Jamie Fleming said.

The county’s maneuver comes as projects stall and layoffs mount.

Local mixer drivers have been on strike for months, starting with a smaller group in November and later expanding to 330 workers for six companies. Without concrete, construction has slowed or stopped on public and private work, including a RapidRide bus-line expansion in South Park and the Washington State Convention Center expansion.

Seattle says the reopening of the West Seattle Bridge, now set for midyear, could be delayed, and Sound Transit says its contractors have laid off more than 200 workers. The city and Sound Transit have both urged an end to the strike.

Job losses are now in “the thousands,” said Monty Anderson, executive secretary of the Seattle Building & Construction Trades Council, a coalition of unions. “And it’s just going to get worse.”

So far, public agencies do not appear to have tried to tap into nonunion concrete suppliers.

King County has not pursued nonunion drivers to get projects moving because “most qualified workers are working for large companies that are union,” Constantine said. Concrete can also only travel a limited distance to a job site.

The concrete companies have maintained a united front during the contact talks. Some industry and government officials see the county’s bid as an effort to break that unity by tempting at least one company into a deal.

“It’s very likely somebody would say, ‘You know what? My trucks haven’t moved in 80 days. This is a good deal. It’s local work. The county pays on time. You guys can keep fighting with the Teamsters, but I’m going to go sign a contract and get to work,’” said Anderson, with the council of building trades unions. “It happens more than you think.”

Contractors were divided Wednesday. Bill Ketcham, general manager of the Seattle office of Turner Construction, called Constantine’s proposal a “great idea.”

“We cannot sustain this current situation where the ... two sides are so at odds with each other that they’re both sitting back and waiting,” said Ketcham, whose company was one of group of around 30 major contractors, developers and subcontractors that released a letter Wednesday urging Teamsters and concrete companies to settle.

“So, if this proposal helps advance discussions and get them closer to a resolution by in some way forcing the hands of the parties, then I’m fully supportive,” Ketcham said.

Others, however, worry that the effort is too narrow to affect the negotiations. Neither Seattle nor Sound Transit have released similar requests for an exclusive concrete supplier, meaning that, for now, any impact of a deal is limited to county projects.

Leon Johnson, president of Mill Creek-based Greater Seattle Concrete thinks the amount of money being offered means the proposal “is not a workable deal.”

The roughly \$30 million in county work is “not that much money compared to what they do privately,” Johnson said. He said his mid-size company alone uses roughly \$10 million in concrete a year, and he reckons that larger builders might use that much concrete in a single month. For “anybody who

understands how much concrete costs and how much people pour, 30 million is a drop in the bucket,” he said.

Johnson, who said he has laid off around 110 of his 170 employees because of the strike, expects the ready-mix companies to continue “sticking together.”

“It sounds like a bunch of noise to me,” he said. “It’s going to have to come down to the union and the ready-mix companies for this thing to get settled.” he said.

King County estimates it will need concrete for at least 92 projects during the next three years, including a new rapid bus line to Burien, a new sewage-treatment facility in Georgetown and road improvements.

The request states that the county’s exclusive supplier “must have a fully executed collective bargaining agreement with a labor organization that represents 100 or more truck drivers regularly employed in King County.” The contract must include both a no-strike clause and a prohibition on employer lockouts during that time.

Those requirements likely apply to few concrete companies other than those whose workers are represented by the Teamsters. The county could choose “one or more” suppliers.

Government agencies often make so-called labor harmony agreements with contractors requiring that strikes and other actions do not disrupt work, but it’s rare to make an agreement directly with the supplier of a building product, such as concrete or steel. Constantine said he thinks this would be the county’s first deal like this with a supplier.

For now, it’s not clear when the concrete companies and Teamsters will meet again.

Negotiators met with two federal mediators last month, but that ended without a resolution. No further dates are set, according to the union.

Neither side will provide dollars-and-cents details about their negotiations.

The companies have said their offer includes a 17.6% pay increase over three years but have not shared exact details of the offer. The union argues the companies want the drivers to settle for a less generous deal than other trades have received in recent years.

According to the union, the top hourly rate for mixer drivers is about \$37 an hour. Pay for public projects is higher. On taxpayer-funded job sites, the prevailing wage for a ready mix driver on a King County project starting today would be \$69.95 an hour, according to the Washington State Department of Labor & Industries. That includes wages as well as benefits such as health care and pension.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 Sound Transit report: Apple Cup train stall
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/transportation/sound-transit-report-pinpoints-cause-of-the-apple-cup-train-stall/
GIST	<p>The weight of a fully loaded light-rail train triggered the post-Apple Cup stall Nov. 26, when inadequate communications led stranded passengers to walk out along the underground tracks, Sound Transit said Wednesday.</p> <p>Sound Transit CEO Peter Rogoff called the stall a “preventable mechanical failure.”</p> <p>When the new Siemens train filled with riders, its coil suspension sagged, providing less clearance over trackway devices than usual, the inquiry found.</p>

A power cable between railcars was sliced when it struck a metal rod (meant to reduce electromagnetic interference under UW laboratory buildings) that was protruding from the trackway, the investigation found. Rows of rods below campus each extend upward, like a bolt end.

“Those rods were higher than they were supposed to be,” Rogoff told members of a transit board committee Wednesday. They should have been cut long before train service north of UW opened last fall. And because of the crush-loaded train, the cable was hanging lower than usual, he said.

The 52-page report sheds more light on the stall at 8:19 p.m. on a Friday night, [some 1,000 feet north of University of Washington Station](#), inside the new tunnel to Northgate Station.

Despite extensive testing before the line opened Oct. 2, key personnel didn’t understand that train cables were at risk of hitting the rods, said Sound Transit internal auditor Patrick Johnson.

Testing and maintenance staff logged 16 work orders related to protruding rods in September, October and November, he said. They found oak boards beneath the railcars — called “safety boards” to knock debris or people aside — were getting cracked, the draft audit says.

Some 200 rods needed to be cut to improve clearance, based on records by King County Metro, which operates the trains, he said. But the problem wasn’t elevated to either Metro or Sound Transit’s safety team, the report found. The bolt-like rods are only supposed to stick out only two threads above the concrete track bed.

In addition, the project’s “dynamic envelope” tests, which assure a moving train clears all obstacles, measured the sides and overhead but not the underside of trains, the report said.

Since then, the rods have been trimmed, and under-train exams will be part of the tests for Sound Transit’s 2023 line from International District/Chinatown Station to Bellevue and Overlake, the agency said.

The post-stall review also explored communication lapses.

In a train with no lights or ventilation, riders coming from the UW-Washington State football game pulled open the doors of the darkened railcars and walked through the concrete tunnel. Some used an emergency passage door into the southbound tunnel where they could have been struck by a train. These cross-passages, required every 800 feet by federal law, are meant as fire escapes, but transit agencies consider it safer to remain aboard in most stalls.

Fortunately, an operator of a train moving in the southbound tunnel was moving slowly and saw the passengers in time to stop safely, [radio traffic shows. Others walked along an edge in the northbound tube, back to UW Station](#).

The first passenger walked out four minutes after the train stopped. After 11 minutes, many passengers were walking through tunnels. The intercom system worked but wasn’t used in the first few minutes, while the train operator was preoccupied trying to restart service. Transit staff had trouble coordinating, surrounded by another 800 people crowding the UW Station platform, the report says.

“We don’t blame the passengers for self-evacuating, given the crowded conditions onboard, without any communication from us,” said Suraj Shetty, executive operations director.

After 26 minutes, transit supervisors began loading people onto a rescue train, which was the southbound train whose operator paused earlier. Its trip to UW Station was delayed in part because some people yanked on its doors, Shetty said.

If communications had been clear, “The rescue train could have been available within 15 minutes, and the entire process would have been shorter and less severe,” he said.

	<p>Even an hour later, Sound Transit staff had not been notified and not issued rider alerts. Officials missed a two-hour deadline, at 10:20 p.m., to notify state and federal regulators of what Sound Transit classified as an emergency evacuation.</p> <p>“It’s clear that all emergency communication protocols must be improved and enhanced,” Rogoff said. Sometime in 2023, as the Eastside line opens, train control will move into a new dispatch center, with communication staff on-site, as in Vancouver, B.C. That will help make public information faster, said Russ Arnold, rider experience officer.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/09 Bellingham limits commercial natural gas
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/bellingham-oks-measure-to-curb-commercial-natural-gas-use/
GIST	<p>BELLINGHAM, Wash. (AP) — Bellingham has become the third Washington city to require new buildings to use electricity for heat as part of an effort to decrease the city’s greenhouse gas pollution from fossil fuels that propel climate change.</p> <p>The City Council voted 7-0 Monday to require all new commercial construction and future residential buildings more than three stories to heat water and rooms with electricity instead of natural gas, Cascadia Daily News reported.</p> <p>The rule, modeled after policies established in Seattle and Shoreline, allows for gas kitchen appliances and fireplaces in those buildings.</p> <p>Bellingham’s ordinance additionally requires new commercial and large residential buildings to meet stricter construction standards for energy efficiency.</p> <p>Existing buildings are not affected by the new requirements.</p> <p>The measure follows work by Bellingham’s elected leaders, city employees and volunteer task force members to develop a Climate Action Plan for the city to be 100% carbon-neutral by 2050, The Bellingham Herald reported.</p> <p>Puget Sound Energy officials had called on the city to consider a hybrid electrification approach, saying full electrification could strain the electric grid.</p> <p>Electrical power is expected to get cleaner in Washington as utilities meet mandates to produce coal-free electricity by 2025, greenhouse gas-neutral power (including the use of carbon offsets) by 2030 and fully green power by 2045.</p> <p>Council members also began talks this week with local labor leaders toward a “just transition” to carbon-neutral energy sources while retaining jobs.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/09 Schools chief: end WA student mask rules
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/education/lab/wa-state-superintendent-wants-statewide-mask-mandate-for-students-to-end/
GIST	<p>State Superintendent Chris Reykdal is asking Washington Gov. Jay Inslee and the state health department to remove the statewide mask mandate for students in schools and let local health officials make that decision instead.</p> <p>“Current laws empower local health officials to assess health and safety risks and determine local strategies,” Reykdal said in a statement Wednesday. “Given the varied vaccination rates and adherence to other mitigation strategies across the regions in our state, it is time to return decision-making to local health officials.”</p>

Masks were necessary when hospitalization rates were skyrocketing and there was limited access to tests, but that has changed, Reykdal said. The expected decline in hospitalization and case rates coupled with high vaccination rates are reasons why the state should reevaluate its policies, including the mask mandate, he argued.

Reykdal still recommends schools continue on-site rapid testing and quarantine those who test positive. He noted some health officials could require a temporary return to masks if cases spike or a new variant poses a risk.

“This is the nature of an ever-changing virus as it moves from highly impactful and unmitigated to much less impactful and more treatable,” Reykdal said. “This change will empower schools to better focus their valuable time on supporting our students’ learning and well-being recovery and acceleration.”

In his announcement, Reykdal said masks have kept students and staff safe but also impacted the learning environment. But the Washington Education Association is worried removing the mandate could cause class disruptions.

“At a time when schools, particularly those in communities of color and low-income communities, are facing staffing shortages, we must anticipate that lifting the mask mandate will exacerbate the shortages and could interrupt learning,” Larry Delaney, president of the state teachers union, said in a statement.

In early January, school districts across the state had to cancel classes because of staffing shortages, or return to temporary remote learning because of a surge in cases. In some cases, Seattle Public Schools didn’t have enough staff and schools shut down.

Delaney said educators need access to high-quality masks, sufficient sick and paid leave, and a metric that shows when a new mask mandate would be needed based on case levels. Since the beginning of the pandemic, WEA has called on the governor to follow the advice of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and their guidance to have masks in schools has not changed, he added.

Other states have relaxed or removed mask mandates. Governors in Oregon and California are ending indoor mask mandates. Governors in Oregon, Connecticut, Delaware and New Jersey have announced plans to end statewide mask mandates in schools.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 Retired Seattle firefighters fear building sale
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/seattle/retired-seattle-firefighters-house-on-the-market/281-103283be-c8a1-4fc9-97e3-597091fe4c35
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — A group of retired Black Seattle firefighters say they had plans to create a museum to honor first responders in the central district.</p> <p>They say it came as quite the surprise when the building they were counting on went up for sale.</p> <p>Clarence Williams, the president of the Northwest Association of Retired Black Firefighters Association, says the four-bedroom home in question was purchased by the Seattle Black Firefighters Association in the early 70s and plans called for it to become a museum.</p> <p>His group says that the Seattle Black Fire Fighters Association - a different group who owns the home - listed the building without consulting with all parties. The property located at 23rd Ave and East Pike Street is currently listed on Zillow for \$675,000.</p> <p>“The feelings range from sadness to disappointment to anger to all kinds of ways because it has such a legacy, not only with our people in the department here, but also with the community,” Williams said.</p>

	<p>“We had training sessions for new firefighters going on here, we had voter registration for the community going on here,” he continued.</p> <p>Doug Johnson, president of the Seattle Black Firefighters Association, issued a brief statement to KING 5 Wednesday. In the statement, Johnson acknowledges ownership of a property in the central district and says that his association is “working with active members and other stake holders to “determine the future of this property.”</p> <p>Meanwhile, in a city where real estate goes quickly, Williams fears their time to save the building is running out.</p> <p>“The building has a lot of sentimental value, it has a lot of history for us, and we certainly didn’t want it to be sold - particularly in this community where, you know, housing prices are skyrocketing,” Williams said.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/10 Hijab protests spread in India
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/10/india/hijab-karnataka-india-protest-intl-hnk/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)A burqa-wearing college student has become a symbol of resistance in India's Karnataka state, where religious tensions are rising over the right to wear religious clothing to school.</p> <p>Muskan Khan was attempting to hand in a college assignment in the city of Mandya when she was accosted by a group of Hindu men wearing saffron scarves -- the color of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) -- according to video posted to social media.</p> <p>The men heckle her as she makes her way across the school grounds, demanding she take off her face covering, but instead of complying, Khan shouts back "Allahu Akbar" as she punches her fist in the air.</p> <p>The confrontation illustrates the religious divide that's been widening in Karnataka since a group of girls began protesting outside their government-run school in January after they were denied entry in the classroom for wearing a hijab.</p> <p>The girls petitioned the state's top court to lift the ban, prompting rival protests from right-wing Hindu students.</p> <p>On Wednesday the court referred the petition to a larger panel of judges, but no date has been set for hearings.</p> <p>Activists say the hijab row is yet another example of a broader trend in India -- one that has seen a crackdown on India's minority Muslim population since Prime Minister Narendra Modi's BJP came to power nearly eight years ago.</p> <p>They say that by denying Muslim women the choice to wear the hijab, the government is denying them their religious freedoms, enshrined in the Indian constitution.</p> <p>"This is a massive attempt by the BJP to homogenize Indian culture, to make it a Hindu-only state," said 23-year-old Muslim activist Afreen Fatima, who has been protesting in support of the students in her hometown of Allahabad in India's northern Uttar Pradesh state.</p> <p>"Muslim women are isolated in India. And the situation is getting worse every day."</p> <p>The 'hijab row'</p> <p>What started as a small protest made national headlines after several other government-run educational institutions in Karnataka denied entry to students wearing hijabs.</p>

The protests have since spread to other cities. Scores of students took to the streets in India's capital Delhi this month holding placards and shouting slogans to express their anger at the ban. And hundreds more have protested in Kolkata and Hyderabad, Reuters reported.

On Tuesday, BJP-ruled Karnataka ordered a three-day closure of all high schools and colleges amid the growing tensions. And on Wednesday authorities in the state's capital Bengaluru banned protests outside schools for two weeks.

For many Muslim women, the hijab is an integral part of their faith. While it has been seen as a source of controversy in some western countries, in India it is neither banned, nor restricted from being worn in public places.

Karnataka's education minister B.C. Nagesh said he supported banning the hijab in educational institutions, citing the state's mandate on religious attire.

"Government is very firm that the school is not a platform to practice dharma (religion)," he told CNN affiliate CNN News-18.

But experts say the issue runs deeper than a dress code.

Karnataka -- where just 13% of the population is Muslim -- is governed by the BJP.

According to lawyer Mohammed Tahir, who is representing one group of petitioners in court, Karnataka is a "hotbed" of the Hindutva ideology supported by many right-wing groups, which seeks to make India the land of the Hindus.

Karnataka has banned the sale and slaughter of cows, an animal considered sacred to Hindus. It has also introduced a controversial anti-conversion bill, which makes it more difficult for interfaith couples to marry or for people to convert to Islam or Christianity.

And according to Tahir, the lawyer, religious tension in the state will likely increase ahead of pivotal state elections next year.

"These issues (like the hijab ban) are very easy to polarize the entire community for votes," he said.

In a statement Tuesday, the Indian Muslims for Secular Democracy [said](#) it "strongly condemns the attempt by Hindutva forces and the BJP government of Karnataka to engulf college and school campuses in the already raging communal fire in the state."

"College campuses have thus been transformed into yet another playing field for the BJP and other right-wing Hindu majoritarians," the statement said.

CNN has attempted to contact the state authorities but did not receive a response.

Muslim women further targeted

The hijab row follows a string of online attacks against Muslim women in India.

In early January, the Indian government was investigating a [website](#) that purported to offer Muslim women for sale. It was the [second time](#) in less than a year that a fake online auction of that kind sparked outrage in the country.

"They came for us online," said Fatima, who was featured on the online app. "Now, they are directly targeting our religious practice. It started in one college, and grew. I have no reason to believe it will end there."

On Tuesday, Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai, called the hijab row "horrifying."

"Objectification of women persists -- for wearing less or more. Indian leaders must stop the marginalisation of Muslim women," she [wrote](#) on Twitter.

The All India President of the Students' Federation of India, V P Sanu, [criticized the hijab ban](#), saying it was used "as a reason to deny Muslim women's right to education."

Modi referred briefly to Muslim women [in a speech in Uttar Pradesh Thursday](#) as that state started voting in local elections.

The Prime Minister said his government "stands with every victim Muslim woman."

He didn't refer to the hijab ban but said the government gave Muslim women "freedom" by scrapping the controversial Muslim practice of triple talaq, which allows a Muslim man to divorce his wife by simply saying the Arabic word for divorce, "talaq", three times. The Indian government [criminalized](#) the practice in 2019.

Khan, the student who yelled at the Hindu men, said she was defending her religious rights.

"Every religion has freedom, India is a unity...every religion has freedom," Khan told reporters Wednesday.

"They are following their culture and I am following my culture. They should let us follow our culture and not raise any obstacle."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 US watching for tips leading to invasion
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/10/politics/ukraine-russia-invasion-signs/index.html
GIST	<p>Washington (CNN)It might be a cyberattack targeting Ukraine's energy grid. Or the movement of Russian battalions and tanks along the border and into firing range. Or perhaps even a long-range missile attack.</p> <p>They're all potential signs US and European officials are closely monitoring that could reveal President Vladimir Putin is moving forward with an invasion of Ukraine. With more than 100,000 Russian troops amassed along the Ukrainian border -- a number that continues to grow -- military and intelligence officials are scrutinizing the latest tactical maneuvers to try to anticipate when Moscow might shift from threatening an invasion to launching one.</p> <p>US officials say they're closely monitoring cyber intrusions, like the attack that hit Ukraine's government last month. They're watching not just Russian troops that amass on the border but where they're positioned, and they're keeping an eye on what Russia is doing with its equipment like tanks that would be central to any ground invasion.</p> <p>At the same time, current and former officials tell CNN that ultimately there may not be a clear tip-off for an attack on Ukraine. Like the rumbling of an earthquake, there may be little or no advance warning of an invasion before it's already underway, officials say.</p> <p>"If you look at the lower-end options, all of which are executable immediately with little to no warning with the forces that are already deployed — things like a punitive strike or raid in the East, a breakout from the south, a raid from the north—those forces are already in position and in the right number with the right capability," a Western intelligence official told CNN.</p> <p>Former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper told CNN that the US may not see the beginning of a whole-hog invasion until they see it. "If he shoots into Kyiv or any other major cities, then you know it's a real deal," Clapper said.</p>

The assessment helps explain why President Joe Biden and top US officials have warned that a Russian invasion is imminent -- an explanation that angered Ukrainian officials -- because the Kremlin may need very little lead time before an attack is launched.

Invasion could happen 'any day now'

While the White House said it would no longer call a Russian invasion "imminent," a senior administration official said the assessment that an attack could happen "any day now" remains valid as the Russians have added logistics and sustainment to their forces on the border, as well as additional offensive and defensive weapons.

Russian officials have repeatedly denied they're preparing to invade Ukraine, [accusing the West](#) of being responsible for escalating tensions there.

The White House on Wednesday [approved a plan](#) presented by the Pentagon for the nearly 2,000 US troops in Poland to help Americans who may try to evacuate Ukraine if Russia invades, according to two US officials familiar with the matter. The US forces are not currently authorized to enter Ukraine if a war breaks out, and there are no plans for them to conduct an evacuation like the US operation in Afghanistan last year, the officials emphasized.

Biden has also suggested that Americans should leave Ukraine now, and State Department officials have said they [may not be in a position to help](#) Americans still in the country should Russia invade.

Officials say there's a distinction between different potential scenarios, whether Russia attacks Ukraine in a targeted way or whether the Kremlin is preparing for a full-scale invasion of the country to try to overthrow the government in Kyiv. In the latter case, the Russians would need more troops along the border, officials say, and satellite images would capture the continued build-up that the West has watched for months now.

"I don't think the math is as simple as saying, there's a magical number of (battalion tactical groups)," the Western official said. "It's just generally speaking, more than we see now."

But officials cautioned that Putin could also begin by using long-range artillery to attack Ukraine, where ground forces would not need to be in range.

Still, one of the key things the US is watching is for when a significant number of Russian forces leave their training areas near the border and move within firing range of their targets, which are specific ground positions, one administration official said.

Another signal that US officials are monitoring is the movement of Russian tanks, one US official said. One sign the Russian military could be gearing up for an invasion is if they start moving around tanks on the border, or turning them on or off, the official said, because if they sit there and don't move for a few days the oil could freeze.

If they are turning them on and off, it prevents that from happening -- meaning the tanks would be ready to go quickly. So far, the official said, the tanks are just sitting there, according to commercial satellite imagery.

The weather in Ukraine [could also play a role](#), the assessment being that colder temperatures -- and frozen terrain -- would make a Russian incursion easier.

On alert for cyberattacks

US and Ukrainian officials say there's a wide expectation that any Russian invasion could be carried out in conjunction with offensive cyber aggression toward Ukraine.

Victor Zhora, a Ukrainian official who investigated the January cyberattack of Ukrainian government websites, [said last month](#) there was "no doubt that (any Russian invasion) can be supported by cyber aggression — or at least they will stay active in cyberspace."

US officials are closely watching for any signs of cyberattacks on Ukrainian critical infrastructure and are in touch with their Ukrainian counterparts on the issue, one US official told CNN. One concern is that Russia could use its hacking prowess to try to erode public confidence in the Ukrainian government.

"Could cyber be used to suggest the Ukrainian government is inept?" the US official said.

Since Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, suspected Russian hackers have disrupted Ukrainian critical infrastructure on multiple occasions, including by cutting power in parts of the country in 2015 and 2016.

"Cyber is an ideal tool for Russia to use prior to an invasion," said John Hultquist, vice president of intelligence analysis at cybersecurity firm Mandiant, who closely tracks the Russian hacking group accused of the 2015 and 2016 disruptions. "You can use (cyber operations) to be aggressive, to signal (intent) and potentially erode the influence of your adversary before bullets fly or without necessary escalating the situation to war."

Officials say Russia is already making use of so-called hybrid warfare techniques — unconventional tactics like cyberattacks, information warfare and the famous "little green men" that Russia famously relied on in the run-up to its 2014 assault on Crimea — making it difficult to pinpoint any one incident as a definitive signal that Moscow is preparing to escalate. The State Department claimed last week that Russia was prepared to fabricate "a pretext for an invasion" through [a false-flag video](#).

The Western official noted that Ukraine was hit by a cyber operation last month that did not precede a conventional Russian attack.

"This one of the hardest questions to answer it because the baseline level of activity is so high focused on Ukraine — and here I mean hybrid and cyber," the official said. "A one-off may not be the indicator that we're looking for that a campaign is beginning."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 Turkey steps up Ukraine support
SOURCE	https://www.foxnews.com/world/turkey-ukraine-support-germany-distant
GIST	<p>Turkey's support of Ukraine in the face of a possible invasion by Russia, despite recent troubles with Europe, highlights Germany's hesitancy as tensions remain high.</p> <p>"On the particular issue of Russia's possible invasion of Ukraine, I think Turkey's playing a helpful role," James Anderson, undersecretary of defense for policy under former President Trump, told Fox News Digital. "They have stated quite clearly that they oppose any further Russian invasion of Ukraine. They have clearly stated their opposition to Russia's intervention in Georgia a few years ago. Those statements are welcome."</p> <p>Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in January approved the sale of drones to Ukraine and last week clearly stated Turkey's willingness to "stand by ... and help" Ukraine. Erdogan also stressed that "Turkey continues to support the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, including Crimea," during a meeting last week with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.</p> <p>NATO member states have not deployed any troops to Ukraine, but they have provided assistance in the form of lethal aid, including missiles, drones and munitions. Germany, perhaps the most vital European member of NATO with its largest economy, shocked Kyiv when it provided just 5,000 helmets for Ukrainian troops, falling well short of the 100,000 helmets and protective vests requested.</p> <p>‘Maturing’ relationship</p>

But Turkey, the second-largest nation in NATO, has stepped up to support Ukraine as part of a "maturing and growing relationship," Anderson said.

Turkey in September 2021 also commenced building the first of four Ada-Class corvette warships it will provide to Ukraine, the first of which may arrive as early as 2023, [Naval News](#) reported.

Turkey's strong support for Ukraine may surprise the West after recent strain on relations. Then-President Obama's [silence](#) following a failed coup attempt in 2016 led Erdogan to accuse the U.S. of supporting the would-be rebels, and President Biden [exchanged](#) critical barbs with Erdogan shortly after taking office, criticizing Turkey's withdrawal from an international agreement to protect women's rights.

"Turkey has been trending in the wrong direction on certain human rights issues," Anderson explained, also citing recent trouble with Cyprus and Greece. "To include, you know, locking up journalists and members of the press, cracking down on civil society. That's also a challenge."

Turkey's ongoing saga over activist and philanthropist Osman Kavala hit a boiling point over the past two months. The Council of Europe in December [signaled](#) its intent to sanction Turkey over Kavala's continued imprisonment after the European Court of Human Rights ordered Turkey to refer Kavala's case to the European body. Erdogan responded by saying Turkey will not respect the Council of Europe, according to [Reuters](#).

Troubles aside

But Turkey has put its troubles aside in order to help Ukraine, even if that help is more or less self-interested, Turkish scholar Kemal Kirisci told Fox News Digital.

"I'm coming to recognize, more and more, how correct are a lot of friends and colleagues in the Turkish Foreign Ministry," Kirisci, a non-resident scholar with the Brookings Institution, said. "For all the abuse coming out of Erdogan's mouth about the U.S., Europe and NATO as well, that Turkey has diligently abided by its obligations to NATO, including the running of the VJTF."

Turkey has run the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force ([VJTF](#)) in Romania since the start of 2021 as an additional commitment to NATO. It also had [maintained](#) a defense expenditure of roughly 1.8% of GDP, short of the NATO-dictated 2% but well above the spending of Canada, Italy and, most notably, Germany, which only spends around 1.5% of GDP as a small increase from its roughly 1.2% for most of the past decade.

Germany has [remained](#) relatively quiet during the crisis, at one point reportedly blocking Estonia from supplying old German howitzers to Kyiv. Ukraine criticized Germany, saying that its stance on arms supplies does "not correspond to the level of our relations and the current security situation."

However, in a meeting with President Biden this week, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz [agreed](#) to cut off Nord Stream 2, a vital pipeline delivering oil from Russia to Germany, if Russia invades Ukraine.

Chancellor Scholz insisted his country will not supply Ukraine with "lethal" aid as officials do not wish to "fuel the situation" and would rather find a diplomatic solution. Germany will provide a complete field hospital and necessary training, but NATO's most critical European member has otherwise fallen short in comparison to other NATO allies who appear to fully recognize the imminent danger Russia poses to Ukraine's stability and independence.

Norbert Röttgen, a senior conservative lawmaker in Germany, told The New York Times that "Germany is critical to achieve unity."

"Putin's goal is to split the Europeans, and then split Europe and the U.S.," Röttgen said. "If the impression prevails that Germany is not fully committed to a strong NATO response, he will have succeeded in paralyzing Europe and dividing the alliance."

HEADLINE	02/09 Gas prices hit highest level in 8yrs
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/gas-prices-highest-since-2014-russia-ukraine/
GIST	<p>Gasoline prices across the U.S. are surging to the highest level in eight years as the price of crude oil rises, spiked by worries about geopolitical tensions in Eastern Europe.</p> <p>The average price of a gallon of gas hit \$3.47 on Wednesday, according to AAA, a jump of eight cents from the previous week. Gas prices this week are at their highest since October 2014, according to the U.S. Energy Department.</p> <p>While gasoline prices typically dip in the first months of the year as Americans wait out cold weather indoors, this year has been different. Oil traders, anxious over the ongoing tensions between Russia and Ukraine, have bid up the price of crude oil to more than \$90 a barrel.</p> <p>"This has not been demand-driven, but it has been supply-driven, and recently we've seen crude oil prices move on the basis of geopolitics. A lot of what-if scenarios: what if Russia does invade Ukraine and we have sanctions?" Tom Kloza, global head of energy analysis for the Oil Price Information Service, told CBS MoneyWatch.</p> <p>Crude costs</p> <p>Russia produced more than one-tenth of the world's oil in 2020 — a sizable portion that would be disrupted with military conflict or threatened sanctions by the U.S. and its allies.</p> <p>While the price of Brent crude oil, the international benchmark, has fallen from earlier in the week, is was at \$91 on Wednesday, or 50% higher than it was at the start of last summer.</p> <p>"Higher oil prices will eventually lead to higher prices at the pump," AAA spokesperson Andrew Gross said.</p> <p>"When oil gets pricier, it's reflected at the pump right away, but when the price of oil drops it seems like it takes forever for the price of gasoline to follow through," he added.</p> <p>About half of the cost of gasoline comes from the price of crude oil, according to the Energy Information Administration. The rest is made up by the cost of refining, transportation and federal and state taxes.</p> <p>Production and refining down</p> <p>Oil-producing countries have been slowly ramping up their output, but global oil production is still below its pre-pandemic levels and lags consumption.</p> <p>U.S. drivers are also affected by refinery closures, OPIS' Kloza said. Since last year, hurricanes along the Gulf Coast as well as Shell's decision to close a large refinery near New Orleans have reduced the nation's refining capacity by about 3%. "It's enough to make a difference," he said.</p> <p>Next year, several large refineries are slated to open around the world, but until that time, oil prices will likely keep rising, analysts say. Some Wall Street banks are expecting crude prices to hit \$120 a barrel, which would break historical records.</p> <p>"This year, if I had to bet on it, I would bet that we'll see the highest gasoline price average for the country that we've ever seen, but it's not going to represent the new normal," Kloza said. The record-high average price of gas in the U.S. is \$4.11 a gallon, set in July 2008.</p> <p>What can government do?</p> <p>Several Democratic senators have called for a suspension of the federal gas tax for the rest of the year, which would save motorists about 18.5 cents a gallon. States from Washington to Rhode Island have eyed similar moves with their local taxes.</p>

	<p>The Biden administration is also in talks with other nations to ramp up oil production or open up oil reserves, potentially repeating a November release of the oil emergency fund that temporarily blunted gasoline prices. Beyond that, the government's options are limited, said AAA's Gross.</p> <p>"There are not a lot of tools that any administration, either Republican or Democrat, can [use], just because so much of what we pay at the pump is wrapped up in the price of oil," he said. "That shows the pickle we're in, because we are so fossil-fuel dependent."</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/09 Trucker convoy protest at Super Bowl?
SOURCE	https://news.yahoo.com/exclusive-department-of-homeland-security-warns-that-trucker-protests-in-us-could-begin-on-super-bowl-sunday-211202623.html
GIST	<p>The Department of Homeland Security is warning law enforcement and public safety officials in the United States that a prolonged trucker convoy protesting vaccine mandates could begin on Feb. 13, when the Super Bowl is played in Los Angeles.</p> <p>The warning of a trucker protest similar to the one that has brought Ottawa, Canada, to a virtual halt, states that "the convoy could severely disrupt transportation, federal government, and law enforcement operations through gridlock and potential counterprotests."</p> <p>According to senior law enforcement officials and documents obtained by Yahoo News, the warning circulated to law enforcement nationwide on Tuesday by DHS states that the agency "has received reports of a convoy of truckers planning to potentially block roads in major metropolitan cities in the United States in protest of, among other things, vaccine mandates for truck drivers."</p> <p>The DHS alert says that "the group intends to start in California as early as mid-February and travel to Washington, D.C., as late as mid-March, reportedly gathering truckers as they travel across the country," adding that truckers from the protest in Ottawa may also head to Washington to participate.</p> <p>The DHS document, which is marked unclassified and for official use only, notes that as of its release on Feb. 8, the U.S. trucker convoy "appears to be purely aspirational because the event is only being discussed online," though it warns that "this could change quickly."</p> <p>A DHS source told Yahoo News that the U.S. trucker convoy "is absolutely a real concern."</p> <p>"They are definitely going to follow the Canadian model and shut down Washington," said the DHS official, referring to the massive demonstrations that have drawn hundreds of truckers and others to Ottawa since last week, disrupting traffic throughout the Canadian capital and prompting the mayor to declare a state of emergency. On Monday, protesters blocked off traffic in both directions along the Ambassador Bridge that connects Windsor, Ontario, to Detroit, shutting down one of the busiest international border crossings between the U.S. and Canada.</p> <p>The DHS official said that a variety of U.S. law enforcement agencies were conducting calls and planning sessions to "figure out what to do" in the event that Washington is similarly brought to a standstill — which, the official said, is a "a real possibility."</p> <p>Initially sparked in response to a new COVID-19 vaccine mandate for truckers entering Canada, the ongoing Ottawa protests have snowballed in recent days. The Canadian trucker convoy has been embraced by prominent U.S. Republicans, including former President Donald Trump, and amplified by right-wing media like Fox News as well as on white supremacist channels on social media, according to a recent Politico report.</p> <p>"At this time, we have no indication that individuals discussing participating in these activities in the United States are engaged in anything other than First Amendment-protected activity," the DHS alert dated Feb. 8 states. "Nonetheless, DHS remains concerned that these events could have significant public</p>

	<p>safety implications or potentially be exploited by ideologically motivated actors to potentially act or encourage others to act violently.”</p> <p>A DHS spokesperson gave Yahoo News this statement: “DHS is tracking reports of a potential convoy that may be planning to travel to several U.S. cities. We have not observed specific calls for violence within the United States associated with this convoy, and are working closely with our federal, state, and local partners to continuously assess the threat environment and keep our communities safe. DHS will continue to share timely and actionable information with the public.”</p> <p>Another federal law enforcement official who is involved in aspects of the planning ahead of a possible U.S. convoy told Yahoo News: “We are tracking this like it’s a real threat because we think it has the potential to cause all kinds of problems, violent or otherwise.”</p> <p>“We don’t want a lot of angry people storming D.C., we’ve seen that before,” the law enforcement official said. “So for now, we monitor movements and see who these people are, if they pose a threat not just to D.C. but of course to anywhere else along the way.”</p> <p>The DHS public safety alert issued on Tuesday stated that the proposed dates for the American version of Canada’s trucker convoy are intended to coincide with the Super Bowl, which is scheduled to take place in Inglewood, Calif., on Sunday, and President Biden’s upcoming State of the Union address on March 1 in Washington. However, the DHS source told Yahoo News the convoy isn’t likely to reach the nation’s capital until late March or early April.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/10 Covid infection increases risk heart ailments
SOURCE	https://www.foxnews.com/health/covid-19-seems-to-increase-risk-of-serious-heart-ailments-year-after-recovery-report
GIST	<p>Any infection with COVID-19—regardless of severity—seems to increase the risk of heart ailments for survivors, according to a new study that one researcher called "stunning."</p> <p>The study found an increased risk of 20 different heart and vessel issues for those who’ve had the virus a year earlier, Science magazine reported.</p> <p>"Governments and health systems around the world should be prepared to deal with the likely significant contribution of the COVID-19 pandemic to a rise in the burden of cardiovascular diseases," the paper read, according to the report.</p> <p>Eric Topol, a cardiologist at Scripps Research, told the magazine that he was surprised by the findings and called the ailments "serious disorders."</p> <p>"If anybody ever thought that COVID was like the flu this should be one of the most powerful data sets to point out it’s not," he said, referring to the study that ran in Nature Medicine earlier this week.</p> <p>Reuters reported that the study found that those who recovered from the virus had about a 63% higher risk of having a heart attack and a 52% greater risk of stroke one year later. The news outlet also said those who recovered had a 72% higher risk of heart failure. The elevated risks seemed to impact everyone, regardless of sex, age or whether there were pre-existing conditions, the report said. The magazine pointed out that even those who were not hospitalized also had greater risk of cardiovascular disease.</p> <p>The magazine said the analysis was based on data from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and included health information from 154,000 people who had the virus. The control groups included millions who received care at these facilities during that pandemic and in 2017. One researcher told Science that there needs to be a follow-up study and raised the possibility that retrospective studies run the risk of having inaccuracies.</p>

	<p>The research focused on individuals who were diagnosed with the virus from March 2020 to January 2021, so many were not vaccinated.</p> <p>"What we're seeing isn't good. COVID-19 can lead to serious cardiovascular complications and death. The heart does not regenerate or easily mend after heart damage. These are diseases that will affect people for a lifetime," one of the co-authors wrote.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/10 Philippines lifts ban on foreign travelers
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/philippines-welcomes-back-foreign-travelers-years-82787455
GIST	<p>MANILA, Philippines -- The Philippines lifted a nearly two-year ban on foreign travelers Thursday in a lifesaving boost for its tourism and related industries as an omicron-fueled surge eases.</p> <p>Foreign travelers from 157 countries with visa-free arrangements with the Philippines who have been fully vaccinated and tested negative for the virus will be welcomed back and will no longer be required to quarantine upon arrival. The government also ended a risk classification system that banned travelers from the worst-hit countries.</p> <p>"We will begin the next chapter in the road to recovery," Tourism Secretary Berna Romulo-Puyat said. She added the border reopening would restore jobs and generate revenue across tourism-related enterprises and communities.</p> <p>British tourist Ian Collins said at the airport arrival lobby that he flew back after two years because he "absolutely loved" the Philippines and wanted to reunite with Filipino friends. "It's just a wonderful country. I'm so glad that you're open again," the 60-year-old Collins told The Associated Press.</p> <p>Malaysian tourist Shaun James Stickney said the pandemic separated him and his Filipina partner for two years, so he took the first flight to Manila when the Philippines reopened to reunite with her and "God willing, get married."</p> <p>The Philippines imposed one of the world's longest lockdowns and strictest police-enforced quarantine restrictions to quell a pandemic that caused its worst economic recession since the 1940s and pushed unemployment and hunger to record levels.</p> <p>More than a million Filipinos lost their jobs in tourism businesses and destinations in the first year of the pandemic alone, according to government statistics. Tourism destinations, including popular beach and tropical island resorts, resembled ghost towns at the height of pandemic lockdowns, and a volcanic eruption and typhoons exacerbated losses.</p> <p>The reopening had been set for Dec. 1 but was postponed as the highly contagious omicron variant of the coronavirus spread.</p> <p>Less than a thousand new cases were added daily during the Christmas holidays, when large crowds of shoppers trooped back to malls and restaurants despite constant government warnings. The subsequent surge peaked above 39,000 infections in a day in mid-January, but has since eased. Health officials reported about 3,600 infections on Wednesday with 69 deaths and have declared the entire archipelago, except for one southern region, at "low to moderate risk."</p> <p>More than 60 million of nearly 110 million Filipinos have been fully vaccinated against the coronavirus and 8.2 million have received their booster shots in a campaign that has been hampered by vaccine shortages and public hesitancy.</p> <p>President Rodrigo Duterte warned Filipinos in televised remarks Monday that "we are not over the hump" and urged the unvaccinated to get immunized soon.</p>

	<p>“If you’re unvaccinated and you die, well, I’ll tell you, ‘good riddance,’” the tough-talking president said. “You can walk around and if you get contaminated, you will be awfully very, very sorry for yourself and your family.”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/10 Paris police ban protesters road blockades
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/paris-police-ban-threatened-blockades-virus-protesters-82793715
GIST	<p>PARIS -- Paris police on Thursday banned road blockades threatened by groups organizing online against COVID-19 restrictions, in part inspired by protesters in Canada.</p> <p>Citing “risks of trouble to public order,” the Paris police department banned protests aimed at “blocking the capital” from Friday through Monday. Police will put measures in place to protect roads and detain violators.</p> <p>Blocking traffic can lead to two years in prison, 4,500 euros (more than \$5,000) in fines and a suspended driver's license, the police department said in a statement.</p> <p>Online chat groups in France have been calling for drivers to converge on Paris starting Friday night, and to continue on to the European Union's capital in Brussels on Monday. Small groups of drivers set out Wednesday from Bayonne on France’s Atlantic coast and Nice on the French Riviera, with stickers on their cars reading “Freedom Convoy.” Departures were also reported in other cities.</p> <p>France has seen weekly protests against vaccine rules and virus-related restrictions for several months, notably by far-right groups. Participation in the protests has waned recently. The vast majority of French adults are vaccinated against COVID-19.</p> <p>The French protesters have been sharing images of truckers in Canada who have blockaded border crossings and paralyzed downtown Ottawa. They want an end to Canada’s COVID-19 restrictions, including a rule that all truckers entering Canada be fully vaccinated.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/09 CDC: Hawaii highest life expectancy
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/hawaii-highest-life-expectancy-81-years-2019-cdc/story?id=82771269
GIST	<p>A new federal report published Thursday has revealed the life expectancy of Americans in every state.</p> <p>Researchers from the National Center for Health Statistics -- a branch of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention -- looked at deaths rates in 2019, the last year for which complete data is available, for each state and the District of Columbia.</p> <p>For the U.S. overall, life expectancy was 78.8 years in 2019, an increase of 0.1 years from 2018.</p> <p>States with the highest life expectancy were mostly in the Northeast and West states while states with the lowest life expectancy were Southern states.</p> <p>"The fact that there can be such large differences in life expectancy within one country, that's what I find most interesting," Dr. Elizabeth Arias, director of U.S. Life Tables at NCHS and first author of the study, told ABC News.</p> <p>Hawaiians had the highest life expectancy at birth in 2019, living to nearly 81 years old.</p> <p>The Aloha State also led the U.S. in highest life expectancy for women at 83.9 years.</p> <p>Rounding out the top five were California, New York, Minnesota and Massachusetts, respectively. California had the highest life expectancy for males in 2019 at 78.4 years.</p>

Meanwhile, residents of Mississippi had the lowest life expectancy, at 74.4 years old, and the lowest for males at 71.2 years.

The bottom five states were all in the South and included West Virginia, Alabama, Kentucky and Tennessee. West Virginia had the lowest life expectancy for women at 77.3 years.

However, the report found life expectancy was higher for women in every single state and in Washington, D.C.

In the United States, the difference in life expectancy between the sexes was 5.1 years. Utah had the lowest difference at 4.5 years and Mississippi had the highest at 6.4 years.

Arias said the gap used to be higher -- about 7.8 years in 1978 -- but has been declining.

"The wide gap was believed to be highly associated with smoking," she said. "So, males took up smoking a lot earlier than females did and with a much higher prevalence. But then, over the decades, females began to smoke close to levels that men smoked. And, as men have been quitting, women have followed but not at the same pace."

The report also found that between 2018 and 2019, life expectancy declined in 14 states, ranging from 0.1 years to 0.5 years.

Five states had no change and 31 states and Washington, D.C., saw increases between 0.1 years and 0.5 years.

The report also examined life expectancy after age 65, when adults are considered senior citizens.

Once again, Hawaii and Mississippi had the highest and lowest life expectancy projections at 21.2 additional years and 17.5 additional years, respectively.

The report did not discuss why some states have lower life expectancy than others, but Arias offered some theories.

"Well, we do know that mortality from the leading causes of death like heart disease, cancer, stroke, accidents, tends to be higher in the states in the South and the Southeast than in New England, for instance, and the Western states," she said. "Smoking prevalence is also higher in the Southern states. I believe there are also higher rates of poverty throughout [the South]."

Additionally, the report did not include any data from 2020 onward, meaning the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are not reflected in the new numbers.

However, preliminary data has shown the global health emergency caused life expectancy in America to drop dramatically.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 Alarm over rise in fires Colombia Amazon
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/environmental-groups-alarmed-fires-colombian-amazon-82778700
GIST	<p>BOGOTA, Colombia -- Environmental groups are expressing alarm about a sharp increase in fires in Colombia's Amazon region that they blame on people clearing forest to make way for cattle ranches, coca fields and illegal roads.</p> <p>More than 150 academics and activists from Colombia, Brazil, France and Spain sent a letter to President Ivan Duque on Tuesday urging the Colombian government to take a more aggressive stance against</p>

deforestation, using the military to put out the fires, creating economic alternatives for people in the Amazon region and arresting those who finance efforts to clear the forest.

“This is a tragedy that could have been prevented” said Sandra Vilardy, a biology professor at the Los Andes University in Bogota who also leads an interdisciplinary group that monitors deforestation in Colombia’s national parks.

The dry season in Colombia’s portion of the Amazon region runs from January to March, which generally leads to an uptick in forest fires. But environmental groups say the number of fires this year is dramatic.

The Foundation for Conservation and Sustainable Development, which monitors deforestation and leads projects to prevent it, reported it detected more than 1,800 fires in the Colombian Amazon in January, up from just 65 in the same month last year. It was the largest number of January fires since 2012.

The foundation uses data on heat points compiled by the Global Forest Watch app and then contrasts that with satellite images and data gathered on its own flights over the Amazon.

Alejandra Gomez, who leads the foundation’s monitoring program said the fires signal growing deforestation in the Colombian Amazon, especially along the rainforest’s northwestern rim, where agriculture is quickly expanding.

“These areas that are burning were most likely chopped down in November,” Gomez said, with farmers returning to burn the downed vegetation once the dry season starts.

Colombia’s Environment Ministry also reported late last month that the number of heat points registered over the Colombian Amazon was the highest for any January in a decade, though Nicolas Galarza, the vice minister for territorial planning, cautioned that heat points are not always equivalent to fires. He said data on January deforestation would be released later this year.

Galarza said that Colombian fire departments have put out 170 fires in the Amazon so far this year.

According to government statistics, deforestation peaked in Colombia in 2017, when the nation lost 219,000 hectares (815 square miles) of forest cover. In 2020, the last year for which figures are available, Colombia lost 171,000 hectares of forests.

Colombia’s government has tried to stem deforestation with military operations against illegal loggers in national parks and by making cutting down forests or financing deforestation a crime punishable by 15 years in prison.

Galarza said the government has also offered subsidies to families in forest preservation programs and increased financing for firefighters.

“Deforestation is a big challenge” the vice minister said. “But it is not something that we have left unattended.”

Critics, however, say programs promoting sustainable use of forests, such as by harvesting natural crops like Acai berries, involve only several hundred families, while the region’s dependency on cattle ranching appears to be growing.

The Colombian Institute for Agriculture reported the number of cattle registered in three provinces in the Amazon region doubled between 2016 and 2021. An investigation backed by the Foundation for Conservation and Sustainable Development found that in villages bordering three national parks, the number of cattle increased from 80,000 in 2016 to 194,000 in 2020.

The country’s largest rebel army, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, abandoned many parts of the Amazon in 2016 following a peace deal with the government. Analysts say that their departure has

	<p>encouraged cattle ranchers and other groups to move in and clear foresta the rebels had depended upon for cover.</p> <p>Vilardy said the government’s inability to prevent the fires makes it harder for the country to sustain commitments it made recently at the global climate conference in Glasgow to reduce carbon emissions and preserve its natural areas.</p> <p>She said that if deforestation continues, some parts of the Colombian Amazon will stop capturing carbon emissions and will instead become net producers of greenhouse gases. She noted that the Tinigua national park has already lost 45% of its original forest cover.</p> <p>“This part of the planet is vital for regulating the world’s climate” Vilardy said. “The levels of deterioration we are seeing in the northern Amazon are not sustainable.”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/09 Slovakia okays defense military treaty w/US
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/slovakia-lawmakers-approve-defense-military-treaty-us-82767780
GIST	<p>BRATISLAVA, Slovakia -- Slovakia’s parliament and president on Wednesday approved a defense military treaty with the United States.</p> <p>The Defense Cooperation Agreement passed 79-60 in the 150-seat legislature in a vote split between lawmakers from the four-party ruling coalition and the opposition.</p> <p>The treaty allows the U.S. military to use two Slovak air force bases — Malacky-Kuchyna and Sliac — for 10 years while Slovakia — a NATO member like the U.S. — will receive \$100 million from the U.S. to modernize them.</p> <p>The deal was signed by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Slovakia’s defense minister, Jaroslav Nad, on Feb. 3 in Washington. It was ratified by President Zuzana Caputova on Wednesday.</p> <p>The parliament vote took place amid fears that Russia will invade Ukraine. Moscow has massed more than 100,000 troops near Ukraine’s borders, but insists it has no plans to attack. The European Union nation of Slovakia borders Ukraine.</p> <p>The treaty was backed by the government of Prime Minister Eduard Heger, who said it will “significantly enhance our security.” But the agreement was fiercely opposed by the opposition, which claims it compromises the country’s sovereignty, makes possible a permanent presence of U.S. troops on Slovak territory and even enables a possible deployment of nuclear weapons in Slovakia.</p> <p>The Slovak and U.S. governments have rejected those charges.</p> <p>“Nothing in today’s agreement creates permanent U.S. bases or troop presence in Slovakia, and the agreement fully respects Slovakia’s sovereignty and laws,” Blinken said during last week's signing ceremony at the U.S. State Department.</p> <p>Thousands rallied Tuesday against the agreement in front of the parliament building in the capital of Bratislava when lawmakers were debating it.</p> <p>The U.S. has such agreements with 23 other NATO members, including Poland and Hungary, two other countries that border Ukraine on the eastern flank of the alliance.</p> <p>Any particular deployment of U.S. forces still needs approval by the Slovak government and parliament.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/09 Mexico wants to 'pause' relations w/Spain
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/mexican-presidents-pause-relations-spain-82784448
GIST	<p>MEXICO CITY -- Mexico's populist, nationalist leader has engaged in periodic quarrels with Spain, but relations reached a new low Wednesday when President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said the two countries' relations should be put on "pause."</p> <p>López Obrador made it sound sort of like a time-out for Spain, a country he had previously asked to apologize for the brutality of the 1521 Conquest of Mexico and centuries of colonial rule. Spain never did, and some have accused López Obrador of using the five-century-old issue to distract attention.</p> <p>López Obrador didn't explain exactly what a 'pause' would mean, but the proposal came at the end of a diatribe against Spanish energy companies he said had taken unfair advantage of private-sector openings in Mexico. The president claimed they engaged in "robbery" and treated Mexico like "a conquered land."</p> <p>"Right now the relationship is not good," López Obrador said at his daily news briefing. "I would like to put it on pause, until we can normalize it, that I think would be in the best interest of Mexicans and Spaniards."</p> <p>"Let's give ourselves a little time, a pause," he said. "Maybe relations will be re-established when the administration changes."</p> <p>Spain's Foreign Minister, José Manuel Albares, downplayed the Mexican president's remarks, noting they were made "in an informal context, in answer to a journalist's question, and so do not constitute an official position or statement."</p> <p>"You would have to ask President López Obrador what he meant by this," Albares said.</p> <p>Spanish energy companies like Repsol and Iberdrola took advantage of openings in the last decade that allowed private and foreign companies to build electrical power plants in Mexico, a sector once dominated by Mexico's state-owned utility.</p> <p>López Obrador is seeking to reverse those openings, because he said the state-owned company was put at a disadvantage with private firms. That proposed change has drawn concern about protecting the Spanish firms' investments.</p> <p>In a 2020 letter, López Obrador wrote "The Catholic Church, the Spanish monarchy and the Mexican government should make a public apology for the offensive atrocities that Indigenous people suffered."</p> <p>The letter came as Mexico marked the 500th anniversary of the 1519-1521 conquest, which resulted in the death of a large part of the country's pre-Hispanic population.</p> <p>In 2019, López Obrador asked Spain for an apology for the conquest.</p> <p>Spain's foreign minister at the time, Josep Borrell said his country "will not issue these apologies that have been requested."</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/10 New Zealand convoy protesters arrests
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/police-arrest-convoy-protesters-zealands-parliament-82784024
GIST	<p>WELLINGTON, New Zealand -- Police on Thursday arrested dozens of protesters who were camped out on the grounds of New Zealand's Parliament on the third day of a convoy protest against coronavirus mandates.</p> <p>The arrests came after Parliament Speaker Trevor Mallard took the rare step of closing the grounds.</p>

Police called in more than 100 extra officers from other parts of the country. Still, police seemed prepared to wait it out as officers formed a line and ordered people to leave but only very slowly advanced on them.

By evening, police had arrested more than 120 people and charged many of them with trespassing or obstruction. Police wore protective vests but didn't don riot gear or carry guns. Some protesters were readying to hunker down for a third night.

Police said they had told everybody on the grounds they were trespassing.

"Police have appealed repeatedly to protestors to leave the grounds and have begun evicting people from the precinct," said Superintendent Corrie Parnell, the Wellington district commander. "While police acknowledge people's right to protest, this needs to be conducted in a way that does not unfairly impact on the wider public."

The protest began Tuesday after more than 1,000 people driving cars and trucks converged on Parliament in a convoy inspired by protests in Canada and elsewhere.

The number of protesters dwindled to a couple of hundred by Thursday. Some of the protesters' vehicles remained parked in the middle of streets around Parliament, forcing some street closures. The National Library and many cafes and bars in the area closed their doors while the protest played out.

Parliament's grounds are often the site of peaceful protests, although mass campouts are unusual.

Typically at least some politicians will come out to listen to the concerns of protesters, but politicians reconvening at Parliament after a summer break appeared to be in rare unison by not acknowledging the protesters, who Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said weren't representative of New Zealanders.

Among the protesters' grievances is the requirement in New Zealand that certain workers get vaccinated against COVID-19, including teachers, doctors, nurses, police and military personnel. Many protesters also oppose mask mandates — such as those in stores and among children over about age 8 in classrooms — and champion the ideal of more "freedom."

New Zealand was spared the worst of the pandemic after it closed its borders and implemented strict lockdowns, limiting the spread of the virus. The nation has reported just 53 virus deaths among its population of 5 million.

But some have grown weary of the restrictions. Ardern last week said the country would end its quarantine requirements for incoming travelers in stages as it reopened its borders. With about 77% of New Zealanders vaccinated, Ardern has also promised she won't impose more lockdowns.

Health officials have been reporting about 200 new virus cases each day as an outbreak of the omicron variant grows. Sixteen people are currently hospitalized because of the virus.

Wellington City Council spokesperson Richard MacLean said it had not been ticketing illegally parked vehicles near Parliament due to concerns over staff safety but was considering its options to get the roads reopened in what remained a volatile situation. He said the council was advising people to avoid the area.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 Australia intel: foreign election interference
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/australian-spy-agency-disrupts-foreign-election-interference-82772065
GIST	CANBERRA, Australia -- An Australian spy agency says it has disrupted a foreign government's attempt to illegally bankroll the election of candidates who are politically sympathetic or vulnerable to inducements.

Mike Burgess, directory-general of the Australian Security Intelligence Organization, did not identify the country when he delivered his annual security threat assessment on Wednesday.

He also did not say whether the targeted election was federal or state. Australians will vote for their national government by May.

“This case involved a wealthy individual who maintained direct and deep connections with a foreign government and its intelligence agencies,” Burgess said.

The wealthy “puppeteer” provided an agent with hundreds of thousands of dollars to find candidates who were either sympathetic or “vulnerable to inducements and cultivation,” Burgess said.

Inducements included promises of favorable stories in foreign-language news platforms, consultants and advertising, he said.

Burgess did not say whether charges have been brought.

Ties between Australia and China have deteriorated in recent years. Beijing was angered by laws introduced by Australia in 2019 that banned foreign donations to political parties and covert foreign interference in Australian politics.

The government explained that the laws were a response to foreign interference in U.S. and French presidential elections plus the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom.

In 2020, Di Sanh Duong, a Melbourne-based leader of a Chinese community organization and former political candidate, became the first person to be charged with foreign interference.

Last year, Sydney-based political adviser John Shi Sheng Zhargon lost his challenge in Australia’s highest court against search warrants used in a police investigation into illegal foreign interference on behalf of China.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 Public employees in Puerto Rico protest
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/public-employees-puerto-rico-protest-wages-frustration-governor/story?id=82774827
GIST	<p>Thousands of public employees from across Puerto Rico took to the streets Wednesday to demand higher salaries and better pensions.</p> <p>The demonstration followed a protest by teachers on Friday demanding a temporary increase of \$1,000 per month for public educators. Gov. Pedro Pierluisi announced this week that funds from the U.S. Department of Education would be used to provide the wage boost.</p> <p>But at a press conference Monday, Pierluisi raised eyebrows when he said being a teacher, firefighter or any other public employee was not an obligation.</p> <p>“No one here is forced to be a police officer or a firefighter, but those who decide towards that calling will have to assume that huge responsibility and if for any reason they question if they should continue to do so amid the salary or work conditions, they are not obligated to remain in their role,” said Pierluisi.</p> <p>The comment caused outrage among many public employees and other residents on the island.</p> <p>“It’s disrespectful,” Spanish teacher Leny Colón told ABC News. Colón traveled to the protest from Coamo, located about 60 miles away from San Juan. She said she attended the protest because she is a teacher, but also supports other public employees.</p>

"We are here because we have a calling but this calling shouldn't be punished... this is a community fight," Colón said.

For Carlos Torres, a teacher from San Juan, the government's comments were "insensible".

"If we wouldn't have pressured him and we wouldn't have marched Friday he wouldn't have done anything," Torres told ABC News, referring to a new temporary salary increase that goes into effect on July 1.

"Our team has made the necessary calculations and has consulted the federal government, and we've been able to identify ESSER funds to provide incentives for teachers," Pierluisi announced in a press release Feb. 7.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, The Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) is part of the Education Stabilization budget. Congress allocated \$13.2 billion from the \$30.7 billion to address the COVID-19 impact on schools across the nation.

Although the raise was praised by many, the wave of negative response from Puerto Ricans in response to the governor's other comments keeps growing -- and the leader says he has nothing to apologize for.

"Apologize for what? I did a lot of comments in solidarity with all the claims being made by the people," Pierluisi said at a press conference on Tuesday.

As for the dispute over salaries, work conditions and retirement plans, many public employees say they will not stop fighting until they see a change.

"Education, safety and health is very important," Colón said. "It's time to make justice for all Puerto Ricans."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 Segregated neighborhoods still pervasive
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/half-century-federal-oversight-segregated-neighborhoods-pervasive-abc/story?id=82678035
GIST	<p>Milwaukee resident Exie Tatum III grew up in heart of the city and still lives there. The African American father owns a home in a predominantly Black neighborhood but has been house-hunting in pricey, majority-white suburbs, searching for an affordable home that he might someday pass along to his young son Charles through inheritance.</p> <p>"It would really change the game," Tatum said of owning a suburban Milwaukee home.</p> <p>But statistics suggest he's fighting an uphill battle.</p> <p>Despite 50 years of federal oversight under the landmark Fair Housing Act of 1968, housing segregation persists in America's largest cities and urban centers -- and an exclusive ABC News analysis of mortgage-lending data shows a pattern of racial isolation remains consistent following decades of failed initiatives.</p> <p>The analysis shows that 20 of the nation's top 100 metropolitan areas have an "extreme dissimilarity index" of 50 or higher -- meaning at least half of the population would have had to move to another neighborhood in the area to achieve total integration in 2019.</p> <p>The Milwaukee metro area is at the top of ABC News' "extreme" segregation list, but that list also includes America's largest metro areas -- New York, Los Angeles, Philadelphia and Chicago.</p>

Also on the top 20 "extreme" list: Cleveland, Ohio; Buffalo, New York, Detroit, Michigan; St. Louis, Missouri; Memphis, Tennessee; Birmingham, Alabama; Jackson, Mississippi; Springfield, Massachusetts; New Orleans, Louisiana; Miami, Florida; Bridgeport, Connecticut; Baltimore, Maryland; Cincinnati, Ohio; Baton Rouge, Louisiana; and Providence, Rhode Island.

ABC News' analysis of segregation and home lending patterns across America used data from the Federal Financial Institutions Examination Council's [Home Mortgage Disclosure Act](#) (HMDA) and the U.S. Census [American Community Survey](#).

Race and ethnicity information in the home lending data is collected voluntarily from the loan applicant or through visual observation by the lender, and by self-identification in the census data.

The data were used by ABC's Owned Television Stations to compile the [Equity Report](#), which allows readers to track and measure quality of life and equality in America's 100 largest metro areas in five categories: housing, health, education, policing, and the environment.

Using the home lending and census datasets, ABC News calculated a dissimilarity index for metropolitan areas and census tract neighborhoods across the U.S.

Indexes like the ones used by ABC News are often used by researchers to measure residential segregation between two racial or ethnic groups within a geographic region. It is based on a 0-100 scale, with "0" being total integration and "100" being total segregation.

The ABC News analysis found that segregation persists across the nation, and that there is no indication that the racial composition of neighborhoods is rapidly changing in the nation's most segregated metropolitan areas.

In 19 of those 20 extremely segregated metro areas, at least 40% of the homeowners who got a mortgage loan in 2019 -- white or non-white -- would have had to buy a house in a different neighborhood to create a naturally integrated pool of new homeowners.

In eight of those metro areas with extreme segregation, at least half the new homebuyers would have had to settle into a new neighborhood in 2019 to make an integrated pool of new neighbors.

Even in neighborhoods where some racial evolution is taking place, the analysis shows an overall disparity: It's easier for whites to buy homes in majority non-white neighborhoods than for non-whites to buy in mostly white sections of a metro area.

In 2019, nearly two-thirds of the 347,000 white homebuyers (64.8%) who applied for mortgages in mostly non-white neighborhoods in America's largest metro areas got a loan approval -- an indicator of what many urban planners and demographers see as a [continued pattern of gentrification](#) in urban areas across the nation.

Meanwhile, about 56% of the 715,000 non-white applicants got a loan in 2019 in those same majority non-white neighborhoods.

In mostly white neighborhoods, the same pattern exists in the largest metro areas. About 69% of the 1.9 million loan requests from white applicants were approved, compared to about 55.8% of 613,000 applications from non-whites.

The ABC analysis shows disparities were similar for applicants in the same income range (\$50,000 - \$100,000) who sought mortgage loans of \$50,000 to \$250,000.

In majority-white neighborhoods, white applicants in those categories had a 67% approval rate, compared to 52% for non-white applicants.

In mostly non-white neighborhoods, white applicants with similar incomes and loan amounts had a 63% approval rate, while the approval rate for similar non-white applicants was 55%.

In some cities, the gentrification process is forcing more non-white residents [out of urban neighborhoods](#), along with the small minority-owned businesses, cultural enterprises and institutions -- barbershops, hair salons, and churches -- that have catered to those residents for decades.

Milwaukee under the microscope

The ABC News analysis shows just how mortgage lending disparities in wealthy suburbs and poorer urban neighborhoods play out in the Milwaukee metro area.

Overall, in 2019, whites filed four times more mortgage loan applications than non-whites, and had 73% of those loans approved, compared to 49% for non-whites.

In Milwaukee's majority non-white neighborhoods -- mainly urban areas where gentrification was taking place -- non-white home seekers filed twice as many applications as whites, but had a lower approval rate -- 55% compared to 64% for whites.

Meanwhile, in majority white neighborhoods, white home seekers filed seven times as many mortgage applications -- and the 73% approval rate among white applicants was higher than the non-white approval rate of 47%.

For Milwaukee metro applicants with similar income and loan requests, the analysis shows the white approval rate in both mostly non-white and mostly-white neighborhoods was 1.5 times higher than the non-white approval rate.

Tatum says he has seen and experienced the suburban housing disparities that the data seem to support -- and how they affect people of color.

Demographically, Tatum has seen Milwaukee change dramatically over the years. But when it comes to segregated neighborhoods, he's seen some things stubbornly stay the same.

"If you look at the north side of Milwaukee, you're going to see African-Americans," Tatum explained. "As soon as you cross the bridge to the south side, that's where the Latino community begins."

By buying a suburban home that he could pass on to his son, Tatum would love to help break that decades-old pattern of segregation.

National studies suggest that homeownership is a key factor in building generational wealth within families. A [2017 Federal Reserve study](#) shows the average homeowner had a household wealth of \$231,400 in 2016, compared to the average renter having a household wealth of \$5,200.

But [U.S. Census data](#) show that homeownership rates among non-white households -- particularly Black households -- falls far short of the white homeowner rate of 76%.

For Tatum and other non-white city residents wanting to relocate to Milwaukee's suburbs, there's reason for optimism: The latest census data show that, for the first time, two suburban communities -- West Milwaukee and Brown Deer -- reported majority-minority population counts.

Those communities are outliers, however. Other suburban neighborhoods in the Milwaukee metro area remain at least 73% white.

For Black residents, the data is even more dismal: Less than 9% in the Milwaukee metro area live in the suburbs.

A "baked" lending system

Tatum and other non-white home seekers across the U.S. blame a financial lending system -- developed and regulated by the federal government -- that for decades has systematically kept people of color from getting home loans, particularly in suburban neighborhoods.

"I still feel like my bankers always have to go to the underwriters and fight for me. They literally tell me, 'I'm going to fight for you,'" Tatum said. "Why do you have to fight for me when I'm meeting all the criteria that you told me I needed?"

In San Francisco, 30-year resident Boris Quinonez has had his own experience with lenders.

Around 2010, Quinonez tried purchasing a single-family home in the city's Mission District, but was denied a loan at least three times by a lender.

Property records show the house eventually sold -- to Quinonez' best friend.

Quinonez said he and his friend had the same job, the same down payment, a similar credit score, and lived in the same neighborhood.

The only difference?

"He was white and I wasn't," Quinonez said. "Everything else was the same."

Rochelle Sparko, the director of North Carolina Policy at the Centers for Responsible Lending, points to historical real estate practices and longstanding racial wealth gaps as barriers that communities of color are still combating.

"It is baked into the system that it is difficult for ... Black people who want to take on home mortgages to have difficulty doing that," Sparko said. "It is possible that some of that is about overt discrimination, but a lot of it is sort of all of these impacts coming together."

Sparko said that obstacles to getting a home loan for people of color include student loan debt and loss of family wealth during the last foreclosure crisis.

"There are any number of reasons why we see this difference in homeownership rates, and I think what we are beginning to recognize and talk about more is the need for targeted interventions to address that," Sparko said.

But targeted interventions of the past, like the GI Bill, proved to be little more than an illusion for many Black Americans.

The GI Bill was supposed to guarantee low-interest mortgages and other loans to veterans returning home from World War II. While it generally helped white American veterans prosper and accumulate wealth in the postwar years, it failed to deliver for many veterans of color -- primarily because white-run financial institutions had the power and incentive to refuse mortgages and loans to Blacks and other veterans of color.

In Milwaukee and other cities across the U.S., restrictive housing covenants -- some dating back 100 years -- helped lay the foundation for America's segregation problem.

Those covenants, written by local housing authorities and developers, and sanctioned by the federal government, prohibited anyone but whites from owning or leasing property in specific sections of a community.

"People who were living in these covenant neighborhoods knew that this meant, 'OK, this is an all-white community,'" said Reggie Jackson, an educator, consultant, and member of the City of Milwaukee's Equal Rights Commission.

"They kept neighborhoods all white for decades," Jackson said.

The covenants led to "redlining" practices in many cities, where federally-insured mortgages, loans and private residential insurance were withheld from non-white homeowners who were pigeonholed into non-covenant neighborhoods considered "investment risks."

The term comes from lenders and other institutions literally drawing red lines around high-risk neighborhoods considered undesirable for business purposes. Redlining thwarted growth and redevelopment in many urban neighborhoods, leading to inner-city ghettos.

Those decades-long practices ended, in theory, with the passage of the Fair Housing Act of 1968, which prohibited discrimination concerning the sale, rental or financing of housing based on race, religion, national origin, gender, disability or family status.

But the legacy -- and patterns -- of segregation left by covenants and redlining still linger.

A demographic analysis by ABC News partner [FiveThirtyEight](#) of 138 metropolitan areas where redline maps were drawn found that nearly all the former redlined zones are still disproportionately Black, Hispanic or Asian, compared with their surrounding areas.

In comparison, the FiveThirtyEight analysis found that two-thirds of "greenlined" zones -- neighborhoods deemed by insurers and lenders to be the best for mortgage lending -- are still overwhelmingly white.

Going "all in" on fair housing

U.S. Senator Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio), chairperson of the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs, which is charged with overseeing the Fair Housing Act, believes the housing act has fallen short in its intent to "address both discrimination in housing and increase integration."

In a [March, 2020 letter](#) to the general counsel of The Department of Housing and Urban Development, Brown points the blame at HUD, which he says has "failed for decades to fully implement (fair housing)." "Sadly, half a century later, our nation has failed to achieve that goal of 'truly integrated and balanced living patterns,'" Brown wrote, quoting the act's original sponsor, former senator and Vice President Walter F. Mondale.

"We have never, as a nation, gone 'all in' on fair housing," Brown told ABC News in December. "We've never, as a nation, tried to close that gap ... that gap between black and white ownership."

HUD Secretary Marcia L. Fudge believes the regulatory agency is on a path toward fulfilling the original promise of the Fair Housing Act. One of the first steps taken by Fudge in her initial year of leadership was to overturn a decision by the previous administration that suspended a rule requiring local communities to identify fair housing issues and commit to solving them.

HUD will be reviewing the assessments coming from local governments that receive federal funding under the Fair Housing Act.

"More than 50 years since the Fair Housing Act's passage, inequities in our communities remain that block families from moving into neighborhoods with greater opportunities," Fudge said in a June 2021 [press release](#). "Today, HUD is taking a critical step to affirm that a child's future should never be limited by the ZIP code where they are born."

Linda McCoy, president of the National Association of Mortgage Professionals (NAMB), believes the way to bridge racial gaps in loan approval ratings is through education and government action.

"You know, I wish I could ... wave a magic wand and make it (housing discrimination and segregation) go away," said McCoy, who's group represents nearly a million mortgage brokers across the U.S.

McCoy noted that NAMB is working with "10 or 12" members of Congress to create legislation that would help mortgage brokers -- particularly those lending in majority non-white communities -- compete with big banks and lending institutions.

"I'm not sure what the solution is going to be, but I know that we're doing all that we can do to help," she said.

Gentrification: The urban neighborhood "makeover"

In the heart of Milwaukee sits a mostly-Black subdivision filled with tidy bungalows, ranch houses and bi-level homes sitting on manicured grass lots.

Halyard Park emits a suburban vibe, even though it's surrounded by decaying, urban neighborhoods and sits in the shadow of Fiserv Forum, home to the NBA champion Milwaukee Bucks.

Established in 1976 with vacant land from the I-43 freeway expansion in the 1960s, Halyard Park was set up as a neighborhood for middle-class Black residents.

It is named for Ardie Clark Halyard and her husband, Wilbur, two Black community activists who saw Black homeownership being stymied by redlining and institutional racism.

The Halyards started Columbia Savings & Loan, the city's first Black-owned bank, and one of only a few that offered home loans to Blacks moving into the subdivision and other urban neighborhoods.

"You had a group of folks that came up with this brilliant idea," said Jackson. "If we can't get these middle-class and upper middle-class black people out to our suburbs, why don't we build a suburb in the city?"

"And that's what they did," Jackson said. "It's a hidden gem."

Halyard Park has remained a gem over the past 40 years -- but it's no longer hidden.

The neighborhood's proximity to the arena and other downtown development makes it attractive to developers and wealthy white homebuyers, which has driven up property values and property taxes.

Halyard Park is a real-time example of the urban gentrification taking place in cities across the U.S. -- a profit-driven race and class "makeover" of a neighborhood that historically has been deprived of investment opportunities.

Since 2018, the ABC News analysis shows lenders have approved 62% of the home loans in census tracts that comprise the Halyard Park neighborhood. But the lenders have approved 76% of the loans for white applicants, compared to only 53% of non-white applicants.

Yet it's not the changing demographics that concern longtime Black Halyard Park residents like Clara Smith. It's the changing economics.

"I have seen my taxes go from \$1,500 to over \$4,000," said Smith, a retiree who's lived 38 years in Halyard Park. "It's going to be a disaster for everybody. I do not want to be taxed out of my home."

Chris Neilsen, one of Halyard Park's newest white residents, says he was drawn to the neighborhood by its diverse environment. But he realizes there's a difference between integration and gentrification that pushes people out.

"Looking to the future, I think it is a concern, and something that we need to be aware of, if we're going to keep a diverse atmosphere," said Neilsen, who bought a house in Halyard Park nearly four years ago with his wife Avery.

	<p>Jackson, the Milwaukee equal rights commissioner, agrees.</p> <p>"Gentrification's like a slow moving freight train," he said. "You see it coming, but you're not going to do anything to stop it from moving."</p> <p>Meanwhile, just a few blocks from Halyard Park, Exie Tatum still dreams of owning a suburban home someday.</p> <p>For now, he's considering a different strategy: buying a foreclosed property in a rundown neighborhood at a cost of only \$1,000 for the house and an adjoining parcel of land. Maybe, says Tatum, he can improve the property then resell it for a handsome return.</p> <p>But Tatum knows all too well the risks of trying to "flip" a house in an area that isn't being gentrified. His current home, which he owns in a predominantly Black neighborhood, is a transitional home that he had hoped to "put a little income into, take a little equity, turn it over, and move out a little further (into the suburbs)."</p> <p>The problem, says Tatum, is that after the house was originally appraised for about \$110,000, it dropped to only \$25,000 by the time he was ready to sell -- all because of the neighborhood where it's located.</p> <p>"I'm jumping through multiple hoops just to stay somewhere where I really don't want to stay," he said.</p>
Return to Top	

Cyber Awareness

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 FBI: \$68M lost to SIM swapping attacks
SOURCE	https://therecord.media/fbi-68-million-lost-to-sim-swapping-attacks-in-2021/
GIST	<p>The US Federal Bureau of Investigation said that Americans lost more than \$68 million to SIM swapping attacks in 2021, a number that has been exponentially increasing since 2018 when the agency first began tracking this threat.</p> <p>To put the scale of the problem into perspective, the FBI said that during last year alone, its Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3) received complaints about 1,611 SIM swapping attacks alone, compared to the 320 complaints it received in 2018, 2019, and 2020 combined, all of which amounted to losses of only \$12 million, a sum 5.6 time smaller than the losses recorded last year.</p> <p>The FBI public service announcement comes to warn both mobile carriers and home consumers to take steps to protect against this new trend among cybercriminals.</p> <p>SIM swapping, also known as the port-out scam or SIM-jacking, refers to a technique where a threat actor calls a target's mobile carrier. The attacker poses as the account owner and requests that the victim's phone number be ported to a new SIM card, citing various reasons such as a defective SIM card or a phone change.</p> <p>If the tech support staff of the mobile carrier fails to verify the caller, or if the attacker provides the correct information, the attacker effectively takes control of the victim's phone number on a smartphone under their control.</p> <p>Threat actors then immediately begin changing passwords to a victim's accounts, using the control they have over a victim's phone number to bypass any identity checks and multi-factor authentication (MFA) challenges.</p>

Initial SIM swapping attacks have been used to hijack high-value social media accounts, most of which were immediately resold online.

Subsequent attacks focused on gaining access to cryptocurrency and bank accounts, from where the attackers stole the victim's funds.

However, in recent years, the technique has also been used for more complex hacks, such as bypassing authentication on corporate accounts for data theft.

Some mobile carriers have taken steps to improve their port-out procedures, but SIM swapping attacks are still happening, usually in three scenarios: (1) when the attacker knows answers to identity verification procedures, (2) when the attacker works with a mobile carrier employee, and (3) when the attacker exploits vulnerabilities in a mobile carrier's IT network to change phone and SIM numbers.

The FBI's PSA asks both individuals and mobile carriers to take a series of basic protections to make SIM swapping attacks against them harder.

Individuals:

- Do not advertise information about financial assets, including ownership or investment of cryptocurrency, on social media websites and forums.
- Do not provide your mobile number account information over the phone to representatives that request your account password or pin. Verify the call by dialing the customer service line of your mobile carrier.
- Avoid posting personal information online, such as mobile phone number, address, or other personal identifying information.
- Use a variation of unique passwords to access online accounts.
- Be aware of any changes in SMS-based connectivity.
- Use strong multi-factor authentication methods such as biometrics, physical security tokens, or standalone authentication applications to access online accounts.
- Do not store passwords, usernames, or other information for easy login on mobile device applications.

Mobile carriers:

- Educate employees and conduct training sessions on SIM swapping.
- Carefully inspect incoming email addresses containing official correspondence for slight changes that can make fraudulent addresses appear legitimate and resemble actual clients' names.
- Set strict security protocols enabling employees to effectively verify customer credentials before changing their numbers to a new device.
- Authenticate calls from third party authorized retailers requesting customer information.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 Major ransomware trends
SOURCE	https://therecord.media/u-s-international-partners-detail-major-ransomware-trends/
GIST	<p>Top cybersecurity agencies in the U.S., U.K., and Australia on Wednesday warned that they observed a global rise in “sophisticated, high-impact ransomware incidents” targeting critical infrastructure in 2021 and expect the trend to continue.</p> <p>The market for ransomware has also become more “professional,” as digital criminals use a wide variety of tools to hack into networks and increasingly share the information they purloin, according to a joint cybersecurity advisory issued by the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), the National Security Agency, FBI, Australia's Cyber Security Centre and the United Kingdom's National Cyber Security Centre.</p>

	<p>Last year saw the most high-profile ransomware attacks in history, including strikes on the Colonial Pipeline, food processor JBS and software company Kaseya. Attacks also proliferated down to state and local governments, school districts and even hospitals.</p> <p>“We live at a time when every government, every business, every person must focus on the threat of ransomware and take action to mitigate the risk of becoming a victim,” CISA Director Jen Easterly said in a statement, adding that while the organization has “taken strides over the past year to increase awareness of the threat, we know there is more work to be done to build collective resilience.”</p> <p>Other major trends identified by the U.S. and its international partners include: cybercriminals diversifying their approaches to extorting money and ransomware gangs targeting managed service providers and the software supply chain; and malicious actors taking advantage of holidays and weekends when security operations centers may be understaffed.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/09 Russia targets 4 dark web marketplaces
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2022/02/russia-cracks-down-on-4-dark-web.html
GIST	<p>A special law enforcement operation undertaken by Russia has led to the seizure and shutdown of four online bazaars that specialized in the theft and sales of stolen credit cards, as the government continues to take active measures against harboring cybercriminals on its territory.</p> <p>To that end, the domains operated by the card fraud forms and marketplaces, Ferum Shop, Sky-Fraud, Trump's Dumps, and UAS, were confiscated and plastered with a banner that warned "theft of funds from bank cards is illegal." Also embedded into the HTML source code was a message asking, "Which one of you is next?"</p> <p>The seizures were orchestrated by the Department "K," a division of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation that focuses primarily on information technology-related crimes, according to Flashpoint. In a related development, state-owned news agency TASS said that six Russian individuals were being charged with "the illegal circulation of means of payment."</p> <p>The four platforms are collectively said to have made over an estimated \$263 million across Bitcoin, Litecoin, and Ether, blockchain analytics company Elliptic said. Ferum Shop, active since October 2013, made as much as \$256 million in Bitcoin from stolen card sales, accounting for nearly 17% of the stolen credit card market.</p> <p>The UAS Store, a popular seller of stolen remote desktop protocol (RDP) credentials and operational since November 2017, netted around \$3 million in cryptocurrency proceeds, with carding store Trump's Dumps making around \$4.1 million since setting up shop in October 2017.</p> <p>The crackdown on illicit carding forums marks the third time cybercrime groups operating in the country have been dealt a blow by authorities since the start of the year. It all kicked off with the arrests of 14 members associated with the REvil ransomware gang responsible for numerous cyberattacks worldwide.</p> <p>Then on January 25, the FSB arrested Andrey Sergeevich Novak, the alleged leader of the now-defunct Infracard Organization, in Moscow, along with three others for running a criminal enterprise that dabbled in the large-scale acquisition, sale, and distribution of stolen identities, compromised debit and credit cards, personal data, computer malware, and other contraband.</p> <p>The latest high-profile action also comes close on the heels of the law enforcement shutdown of Canadian HeadQuarters (aka CanadianHQ), a darknet marketplace that was involved in the purchase and sale of spam services, phishing kits, stolen credential data dumps, and access to compromised machines.</p>

What's more, recent months have been [plagued](#) by the [closures](#) of a [number of dark web marketplaces](#) like White House Market, Cannazon, ToRReZ, DarkMarket, Monopoly, and UniCC in a move that's [perceived as a major blow](#) to the carding industry after the collapse of the infamous [Joker's Stash](#) in January 2021.

"Closures and seizures of carding sites in 2022 have so far accounted for almost 50% of sales in the dark web stolen credit card market," Elliptic [said](#). "Darknet markets remain highly lucrative enterprises, and if anything, the retirements could give operators the confidence that they can operate a successful market and make their fortunes – without being apprehended."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 Banks warned of possible cyberattacks
SOURCE	https://www.scmagazine.com/analysis/cybercrime/us-banks-warned-of-possible-cyberattacks-amid-russia-ukraine-tensions
GIST	<p>In the wake of widespread reports Wednesday that the European Central Bank (ECB) raised its threat level for cybercrime for banks in Europe, U.S. financial firms may soon be feeling the heat from increasingly more sophisticated nation-state hackers.</p> <p>Initially citing unnamed sources in the financial industry, Reuters reported Feb. 9 that banks in Europe and the United States are being warned to brace for a potentially potent attack, most likely coming from Russia. The concern over a potential widespread cyberattack on the banking community largely emanates from the ongoing feud between Russia and the Ukraine, which has the former massing troops near the border and most political leaders in Europe taking sides.</p> <p>"I think it's pretty obvious there's a real concern here," said Victor Wieczorek, director of threat and attack simulation at cybersecurity firm GuidePoint Security. While European and U.S. financial regulators and politicians do not want to "raise concerns unduly" causing fear-mongering and potentially further worsening tensions, he said that "this has been the culmination of many [events] — not just one red flag."</p> <p>Aside from the recent developments on the physical border of Russia and Ukraine, Wieczorek, who manages nation-state red teaming, pointed out the takedown of the SkyFraud cybercrime forum and recent messaging by Russia that has added to the ongoing cyber-posturing.</p> <p>Funded by the Russian government, and led by top-notch hackers, speculation is that a nation-state attack might target the financial industry in any number of European countries or the United States, which are seen as partisan in these rising tensions. In late January, the New York Department of Financial Services reportedly warned the financial firms it regulates that the situation online and offline could heat up if Russia continued to escalate its position and invade the Ukraine, forcing the U.S. to lay down sanctions against Russia, per Thomson Reuters' Regulatory Intelligence.</p> <p>Many industries may feel the weight of a Russian-based cyberattack, as SC Media reported earlier this month, but potentially none so heavily as the financial industry, where a successful cyberattack could not only throw a huge spanner in the works of banking and payments, but could potentially create a significant distraction that Russia could exploit in its attacks on Ukraine. While White House officials have been long condemning Russia for impactful cyberattacks for years — witness 2017's NotPetya — Russian political officials have publicly denied that that have or would back any such kind of state-funded cybercrime.</p> <p>The further downstream effect could present even more issues on the cybersecurity front for financial institutions. Nation-state hackers could use a sophisticated incursion at a major financial institution as a path to other companies in technology, industrial, food supply or the government. And, Wieczorek claimed, when the nation-state zero-days and attacks are uncovered and become public, cybercrime syndicates could smell blood in the water and enlist those same tactics and technologies, too — creating a financial industry cyber feeding frenzy.</p> <p>"There could be a long tail to this threat," Wieczorek said. "I could see all sorts of rules flipped on their head."</p>

HEADLINE	02/09 Cybercrime growing threat intelligent bots
SOURCE	https://www.securityweek.com/data-highlights-growing-threat-intelligent-bots-operated-scale-cybercriminals
GIST	<p>The intelligent bot revolution continues. Eighty-six percent of attacks against accounts are now driven by bots that have become 3 times more complex than those seen in earlier years – making it harder for security teams to detect bot signatures.</p> <p>Details have been released in the <i>2022 State of Fraud and Account Security</i> (PDF) published by Arkose Labs. Figures come from an analysis of actual user sessions and attack patterns seen on the Arkose Labs Fraud and Abuse Prevention Platform in 2021. This means that the figures cannot be applied to the entire market, but relate to those companies that have a sufficient fraud problem to seek protection from Arkose. That said, the report is a stark indication of the growing threat from intelligent bots operated at scale by cybercriminals. Statistics show that 1 in 4 new account registrations are fake; 80% of login attacks are credential stuffing; there's a 16% increase in mobile attack traffic; and 5 in 6 industries have seen an increase in attacks.</p> <p>The report also shows how responsive the attackers are to user engagement. As user engagement increases, so do attacks. The gaming industry suffered what Arkose calls 'unprecedented' attacks in 2020 – probably due to an increase in gaming during the pandemic-induced lockdowns. As the lockdowns eased in 2021 and the gaming industry implemented new controls, gaming attacks declined 2x faster than user engagement.</p> <p>The travel industry was also seriously affected by the pandemic restrictions. But as countries began to relax border controls in 2021 and extensive travel returned, so did the attackers. While the retail and financial industries were just a mere two times more likely to be attacked, and tech industries five times more likely, the travel industry was a colossal 12.5 times more likely to be attacked in 2021 than in 2020.</p> <p>"Loyalty points and buying tickets are once again something people are looking to do, and fraudsters can resell them," Arkose CEO and founder Kevin Gosschalk told <i>SecurityWeek</i>. "During the earlier stages of the pandemic, people were uninterested in buying airline tickets. Fraudsters couldn't sell them, so they stopped bothering to defraud airlines," Now they're back.</p> <p>Following this 'user engagement' principle, an area to watch in the future is the unfolding metaverse. "The beginnings of a concept known as the 'metaverse' means a new attack vector for bad guys," says the report. "Early insights from our global network show scams, microtransaction abuse, and unfair play to be top threats in a metaverse world."</p> <p>The metaverse can be typified by Linden Labs' Second Life launched in 2003. It's a virtual world where users can create their own surroundings – and meet other Second Lifers. It has been joined by a massive gaming industry with different online games creating their own virtual worlds, and it will be further expanded by VR and AR. Users, especially among the young, are increasingly drawn into and are spending more of their lives in these virtual worlds. As time goes on, however, metaverse worlds will expand well beyond gaming to include a virtual solution to many existing physical requirements.</p> <p>Metaverse companies are most likely to be targeted by what Arkose describes as 'master fraudsters'; that is, more persistent attackers who script together multiple tools, use a combination of bots and fraud farms, and are willing to invest more capital to bypass a single workflow. Already, metaverse companies have seen 80% more bot attacks and 40% more human attackers than other businesses. The potential to steal virtual currency, that can be exchanged for fiat currency, is enormous.</p> <p>"Another growth area for the attackers is fraudulent accounts," said Gosschalk. As more activities have moved online, online companies have been looking for ways to attract the customers to their own services. One approach from cloud computing services has been to offer free services to new clients for a short period of time. "What the fraudsters do," said Gosschalk, "is use the free period to run cryptomining software. They only 'earn' a tiny amount of crypto per account before the free period expires or the</p>

account gets blocked. But what they do is open millions of these accounts by automation, and then they can start getting real profit.”

The solution to the fraud problem, he said, is a strategy. “First and foremost, you need to understand what the adversary is after – you need to understand how the criminal profits from his actions and the complete path to that profit. So, while payment fraud might appear to be a primary problem, it is really a symptom of other issues. The real problem may be that customer accounts are getting compromised, and those accounts are being used to commit payment fraud. Instead of trying to solve the payment fraud, you should be trying to solve the account compromise problem.”

He suggests that it is important to understand the entire journey of the fraudsters, including both how they get in and how they get their money out. “What you must do is increase their costs all the way through that journey, and you need to do it in a risk adaptive way. You don’t want to apply friction to all your customers because that’s counterproductive. But you want to be acting against everything that may be a little unusual – and perhaps bump it to a manual review.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 Hamas cyberspies return w/new malware
SOURCE	https://www.securityweek.com/hamas-cyberspies-return-new-malware-after-exposure-operations
GIST	<p>A cyberespionage group linked in the past to the Palestinian terrorist organization Hamas took a break after its operations were exposed last summer and returned with new tools and techniques.</p> <p>According to enterprise security firm Proofpoint, the threat actor known as Molerats apparently took a short break after the company released information on its activities in June 2021. During that break, it updated its malware and delivery mechanisms.</p> <p>Molerats has been active since at least 2011 and it focuses on the Middle East. It’s also tracked as Gaza Hackers Team, Gaza Cybergang, DustySky, Extreme Jackal, Moonlight and TA402 — some researchers believe there are multiple groups operating under the same umbrella.</p> <p>It’s worth noting that Molerats’ operations are often exposed by cybersecurity firms and researchers, but that does not appear to have discouraged the threat actor. In 2019, Kaspersky even managed to disrupt a significant part of the infrastructure used by the cyberspies and, in the same year, Israel claimed to have bombed a building housing Hamas cyber operatives in response to a cyberattack.</p> <p>In a blog post published on Tuesday, Proofpoint said the hackers have apparently replaced an implant named LastConn with a new one that the cybersecurity firm has dubbed NimbleMamba. The malware was used in late 2021 in attacks aimed at Middle Eastern entities, including governments, foreign policy think tanks, and a state-affiliated airline.</p> <p>Proofpoint researchers found that while NimbleMamba and LastConn have some similarities, there is little overlap between the two when it comes to code.</p> <p>“NimbleMamba has the traditional capabilities of an intelligence-gathering trojan and is likely designed to be the initial access. Functionalities include capturing screenshots and obtaining process information from the computer. Additionally, it can detect user interaction, such as looking for mouse movement,” Proofpoint explained.</p> <p>The malware has been delivered both via malicious websites and Dropbox — the file sharing service has also been abused for command and control (C&C) and file exfiltration. Researchers also found that NimbleMamba uses “guardrails” to ensure that it only infects devices in specified countries in the Middle East and Africa.</p>

“The malware also contains multiple capabilities designed to complicate both automated and manual analysis,” researchers said. “Based on this, Proofpoint assesses NimbleMamba is actively being developed, is well-maintained, and designed for use in highly targeted intelligence collection campaigns.”

Recently, Zscaler also published a report on [new espionage operations](#) conducted by Molerats, targeting the banking sector in Palestine, individuals related to Palestinian political parties, as well as human rights activists and journalists in Turkey. Proofpoint believes the attacks it has analyzed occurred concurrently to the activity detailed by Zscaler.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 Romance fraud losses spike amid Covid
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/romance-fraud-losses-increased/
GIST	<p>Romance fraud losses surged by 91% during COVID-19 compared to pre-pandemic levels, according to new research from TSB.</p> <p>The bank said it had observed cases of romance fraud double in the pandemic as a result of the shift to online dating amid social distance restrictions. It also found that the average financial loss per victim over this period was an eye-watering £6100.</p> <p>Interactions that originated on Facebook accounted for the highest number of fraud cases, at 35%. This was followed by the dating sites Tinder (24%), Plenty of Fish (21%) and Match.com (9%).</p> <p>TSB also calculated the length of these virtual ‘relationships’ by analyzing its own data relating to victims’ first and last payments to fraudsters. These lasted for an average of 62 days, with the longest one spanning nearly three years. In almost a third (32%) of cases, victims transferred money to the fraudsters for periods lasting over two weeks before realizing the scam. In 27% of cases, payments lasted over a month, and 11% continued over half a year.</p> <p>Interestingly, women made up two-thirds (66%) of TSB’s cases and suffered significantly higher financial losses on average than men (£6300 vs. £4600).</p> <p>While all age groups were shown to be vulnerable to this type of fraud, the average age of the victims was 47.</p> <p>Commenting on the findings, relationship coach and psychologist Sam Owen noted: “The past two years left people craving human connection, especially if they’d been living alone and feeling lonely while the rest of the world seemed coupled-up. Sadly, it was the perfect storm that would inevitably result in a significant increase in digital fraud cases.”</p> <p>Paul Davis, director of fraud prevention at TSB, advised online dating users: “Dating sites and social media can be a great way of meeting people and staying connected during the pandemic – but they’re also riddled with scammers, hoping to break your heart and your bank balance with cruel and complex tricks.</p> <p>"When interacting online, it’s important to remain on guard. Don’t put your trust in people you’ve never met in person – and if the conversation ever moves on to money, then it’s time to stop.”</p> <p>Last month, the UK’s National Fraud Intelligence Bureau (NFIB) reported that total financial losses from romance fraud over the year (November 2020 to October 2021) stood at a staggering £92m.</p> <p>Discussing the new research, Jake Moore, global cyber security advisor at ESET said: “People are often too quick to judge others who have fallen victims to these attacks but the truth is that these scam artists are very good manipulators and extremely skilful in their craft. Catfishing is very difficult to spot initially, especially when the victim is caught up in the initial attraction on a platform where relationships are common. However, it is vital that online daters are equipped with the knowledge of how to spot a scam. It</p>

	<p>often isn't as easy as just saying 'do not send money to someone you haven't met' as these scam artists are very good storytellers and often make the situation very authentic with phone and video calls.</p> <p>"I would advise anyone to reverse image search the profile picture and look for their profile on other social networks. I would also recommend you try to meet in person before handing over any sensitive information or money. It is a good idea to speak with friends about anyone you are in contact with as it is usually a third person who initially realises a potential scam occurring."</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/09 Study: women in UK were cyber-flashed
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/uk-cyber-flashing-study/
GIST	<p>More than a fifth of young female social media users living in the UK have received unsolicited sexually explicit digital content in the past twelve months, according to a new study.</p> <p>The research, commissioned by the charity Girlguiding, was conducted to examine the extent of online sexual abuse directed at young women and girls in the UK.</p> <p>Researchers polled 1,002 users aged between 13 and 21. Only 15% of those surveyed believed social media was a safe space for them.</p> <p>Findings revealed that one in three users had experienced cyber-harassment of a sexualized nature. Pressure had been placed on 16% of users to share indecent images of themselves.</p> <p>The study found that nearly all girls aged 13 to 15 had experienced negative emotions such as anxiety, anger, fear and depression after being asked to expose their naked bodies.</p> <p>The highest volume of requests to share nudes was received by girls with disabilities. This group was also subjected to the highest number of sexist comments and the most bullying.</p> <p>Girlguiding's chief executive, Angela Salt, said the study's results showed that online harassment of young women and girls in the UK had a "devastating impact."</p> <p>The online abuse can start at a young age. Eleven-year-old user Eva said she was just nine years old when students at her school bullied her over Facebook Messenger, accusing her of performing sexual acts with boys.</p> <p>"I didn't understand," said Eva, "I was really confused by what they were saying."</p> <p>Salt called for the UK government to recognize the effect cyber-harassment is having on the kingdom's young female population.</p> <p>"Girls and young women should be able to use the internet freely, safely and without fear," said Salt.</p> <p>She added: "Sadly, our research highlights that there is still a long way to go before this is reality, which is why we are calling on the government to ensure violence against girls and women online and its devastating impact is recognized and included within the Online Safety Bill."</p> <p>The UK government unveiled plans on Monday to strengthen the Bill by criminalizing additional acts and forcing pornography websites to use age verification technologies.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/10 Ransomware warning critical infrastructure
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/new-ransomware-warning-critical/
GIST	The UK, US and Australian authorities have issued a new warning for critical infrastructure (CNI) providers after a surge in ransomware attacks over the past year.

The [Joint Cybersecurity Advisory](#) comes from the UK's National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC), the Australian Cyber Security Centre (ACSC) and the FBI, NSA and US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA).

It claims that 14 out of 16 US CNI sectors were hit by ransomware in 2021, while education was the number one target in the UK.

Phishing, stolen or brute-forced remote desktop protocol (RDP) credentials and vulnerability exploitation remain the top threat vectors, with the agencies warning of growth in ransomware-as-a-service affiliates.

The alert also flags that different ransomware groups in Eurasia are sharing information with each other. However, it's not clear in many instances if the groups are distinct or have merely rebranded.

There's also been a shift away from "big-game hunting" in the US to mid-sized targets, which may attract less attention. This can be seen in the context of aggressive US law enforcement activity prompted by the Colonial Pipeline and JBS USA attacks.

Ransomware groups have also increased their impact by targeting vulnerabilities in cloud applications, virtual machine software, and orchestration software, as well as cloud accounts and APIs, the agencies noted.

Targeting of industrial processes, MSPs and software supply chains is also an increasingly common way to increase the chances of a successful attack, as is deploying malware on a weekend or public holiday, the alert added.

The document has an extensive list of industry best practices that could help CNI firms mitigate the risk of ransomware compromise.

"The advisory confirms that we are now all facing an increased level of risk associated with the threats presented by ransomware. It stands to reason that so long as ransom payments are being made, we can expect this now highly sophisticated industry to continue to grow," said Vectra AI EMEA CTO, Steve Cottrell.

"With the emergence of highly professional ransomware as a service operators, the barrier to entry for criminals has never been lower."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 Magecart attacks target outdated Magento
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/wave-of-magecart-attacks-target-hundreds-of-outdated-magento-sites/
GIST	<p>Analysts have found the source of a mass breach of over 500 e-commerce stores running the Magento 1 platform and involves a single domain loading a credit card skimmer on all of them.</p> <p>According to Sansec, the attack became evident late last month when their crawler discovered 374 infections on the same day, all using the same malware.</p> <p>The domain from where threat actors loaded the malware is naturalfreshmall[.]com, currently offline, and the goal of the threat actors was to steal the credit card information of customers on the targeted online stores.</p> <p>Planting backdoors</p> <p>Sansec's subsequent investigation unveiled that the attackers abused a known vulnerability in the Quickview plugin to inject rogue Magento admin users that could then run code with the highest privileges.</p>

The abuse happens via adding a validation rule into the customer_eav_attribute table. This tricks the host app into crafting a malicious object, which is then used to create a simple backdoor (api_1.php).

The validation rules for new customers are the clever part of the attack, as this triggers the payload to be injected into the sign-up page.

In addition to injecting the credit card skimmer, the hackers can also use the api_1.php backdoor to execute commands on the remote server, leading to a complete site takeover.

In practice, though, siphoning payment details using MageCart attacks (skimmers) is more beneficial to the threat actors; that's why this particular wave of attacks focused on doing precisely that.

Sansec points out that in an extreme case, the adversaries injected as many as 19 backdoors on a single e-commerce platform, possibly experimenting to figure out what works best for their purpose or just being very serious about its redundancy.

Magento 1 is still in use

Adobe has stopped supporting the Magento 1 branch of the popular e-commerce platform since June 30, 2020, but thousands of sites are still using the outdated software.

This makes the sites vulnerable to a wide range of hacker attacks, and by extension, puts the sensitive details of their customers at risk.

These details typically include credit card numbers, shipping addresses, names, phone numbers, email addresses, and generally all that's needed for placing an online order.

It is strongly recommended that all Magento admins [confirm they are using the latest version](#) of the platform and upgrade if using older unsupported versions.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 PHP Everywhere RCE flaws WordPress sites
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/php-everywhere-rce-flaws-threaten-thousands-of-wordpress-sites/
GIST	<p>Researchers found three critical remote code execution (RCE) vulnerabilities in the 'PHP Everywhere' plugin for WordPress, used by over 30,000 websites worldwide.</p> <p>PHP Everywhere is a plugin that allows WordPress admins to insert PHP code in pages, posts, the sidebar, or any Gutenberg block, and use it to display dynamic content based on evaluated PHP expressions.</p> <p>Three RCE flaws</p> <p>The three vulnerabilities were discovered by security analysts at Wordfence and can be exploited by contributors or subscribers, affecting all WordPress versions from 2.0.3 and below.</p> <p>Here's a short description of the flaws:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• CVE-2022-24663 – Remote code execution flaw exploitable by any subscriber by allowing them to send a request with the 'shortcode' parameter set to PHP Everywhere, and execute arbitrary PHP code on the site. (CVSS v3 score: 9.9)• CVE-2022-24664 – RCE vulnerability exploitable by contributors via the plugin's metabox. An attacker would create a post, add a PHP code metabox, and then preview it. (CVSS v3 score: 9.9)• CVE-2022-24665 – RCE flaw exploitable by contributors who have the 'edit_posts' capability and can add PHP Everywhere Gutenberg blocks. Default security setting on vulnerable plugin versions isn't on 'admin-only' as it should be. (CVSS v3 score: 9.9)

While the last two flaws aren't easily exploitable as they require contributor-level permissions, the first vulnerability is a lot more open to broader exploitation as it can be exploited by just being a subscriber on the site.

For example, a logged-in customer on a site is considered a 'subscriber,' so merely registering on the target platform would be enough to gain enough privileges for malicious PHP code execution.

In all cases, executing arbitrary code on a site can lead to a complete site takeover, which is the worst possible scenario in website security.

Fix only for Block editor

Wordfence's team discovered the vulnerabilities on January 4, 2022, and informed the author of PHP Everywhere of its findings.

The vendor released a security update on January 10, 2022, with version 3.0.0, which took a major version number bump because it required a substantial code rewrite.

While the developers fixed the update last month, it is not uncommon for admins to not regularly update their WordPress site and plugins. According to the [download stats](#) on WordPress.org, only 15,000 installs out of 30,000 have updated the plugin since the bugs were fixed.

Therefore, due to the severity of these vulnerabilities, all users of PHP Everywhere are strongly advised to make sure they have upgraded to PHP Everywhere version 3.0.0, which is [the latest available at this time](#).

Note that if you're using the Classic Editor on your site, you will need to uninstall the plugin and find another solution for hosting custom PHP code on its components.

That is because version 3.0.0 only supports PHP snippets via the Block editor, and it's unlikely that the author will work on restoring functionality for the sun-setting Classic.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 Fake Windows 11 upgrade installers
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/fake-windows-11-upgrade-installers-infect-you-with-redline-malware/
GIST	<p>Threat actors have started distributing fake Windows 11 upgrade installers to users of Windows 10, tricking them into downloading and executing RedLine stealer malware.</p> <p>The timing of the attacks coincides with the moment that Microsoft announced Windows 11's broad deployment phase, so the attackers were well-prepared for this move and waited for the right moment to maximize their operation's success.</p> <p>RedLine stealer is currently the most widely deployed password, browser cookies, credit card, and cryptocurrency wallet info grabber, so its infections can have dire consequences for the victims.</p> <p>The campaign</p> <p>According to researchers at HP, who have spotted this campaign, the actors used the seemingly legitimate "windows-upgraded.com" domain for the malware distribution part of their campaign.</p> <p>The site appears like a genuine Microsoft site and, if the visitor clicked on the 'Download Now' button, they received a 1.5 MB ZIP archive named "Windows11InstallationAssistant.zip," fetched directly from a Discord CDN.</p> <p>Decompressing the file results in a folder of 753MB of size, showcasing an impressive compression ratio of 99.8%, achieved thanks to the presence of padding in the executable.</p>

	<p>When the victim launches the executable in the folder, a PowerShell process with an encoded argument starts.</p> <p>Next, a cmd.exe process is launched with a timeout of 21 seconds, and after that expires, a .jpg file is fetched from a remote web server.</p> <p>This file contains a DLL with contents arranged in reverse form, possibly to evade detection and analysis.</p> <p>Finally, the initial process loads the DLL and replaces the current thread context with it. That DLL is a RedLine stealer payload that connects to the command-and-control server via TCP to get instructions on what malicious tasks it has to run next on the newly compromised system.</p> <p>Outlook</p> <p>Although the distribution site is down now, nothing stops the actors from setting up a new domain and restarting their campaign. In fact, this is very likely already happening in the wild.</p> <p>Windows 11 is a major upgrade that many Windows 10 users cannot get from the official distribution channels due to hardware incompatibilities, something that malware operators see as an excellent opportunity for finding new victims.</p> <p>As BleepingComputer reported in January, threat actors are also leveraging Windows' legitimate update clients to execute malicious code on compromised Windows systems, so the tactics reported by HP are hardly surprising at this point.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/09 Linux malware on the rise
SOURCE	https://www.darkreading.com/cloud/linux-malware-on-the-rise-including-illicit-use-of-cobalt-strike
GIST	<p>Ransomware, cryptojacking, and a cracked version of the penetration-testing tool Cobalt Strike have increasingly targeted Linux in multicloud infrastructure, report states.</p> <p>With Linux frequently used as the basis for cloud services, virtual-machine hosts, and container-based infrastructure, attackers have increasingly targeted Linux environments with sophisticated exploits and malware.</p> <p>New analysis, based on telemetry collected from attacks on VMware customers, shows an increasing number of ransomware programs targeting Linux hosts to infect virtual-machine images or containers; more use of cryptojacking to monetize illicit access; and more than 14,000 instances of Cobalt Strike — 56% of which are pirated copies used by criminals or thrifty companies that have not bought licenses. The red-team tool has become so popular as a way to manage compromised machines that underground developers created their own protocol-compatible version of the Windows program for Linux, VMware states in a newly released report, "Exposing Malware in Linux-based Multi-Cloud Environments."</p> <p>While attackers may not be shifting from Windows to Linux, the level of activity shows that they are increasingly targeting Linux as well, says Brian Baskin, lead for VMWare's Threat Analysis Unit (TAU) group.</p> <p>"Most research has been focused on the Windows side, but we are now seeing an increase in attacks on the Linux side and especially against multicloud infrastructure," he says. "Most of the cases we see involve misconfiguration at the hypervisor level or, at the server level, shared accounts, shared passwords, and poorly configured role-based access controls."</p> <p>Initial access is often not through exploitation but through credential theft. While remote code execution is the second most popular way to breach such systems — such as exploitation of the prevalent Log4j</p>

vulnerabilities — stolen credentials often give attackers more time to explore inside a victim's network, says Giovanni Vigna, senior director of threat intelligence at VMware.

"The main attack surface area is still stolen credentials, which has the advantage that it takes a longer time to understand that a compromise has happened," he says. "The login could seem absolutely normal and an attacker gets access to resources, but it's not until things start going in the wrong direction that the breach is actually identified."

Ransomware Alert

Following initial access, however, a variety of Linux-based malware is brought to bear. From ransomware, to crypto-miners, to implants from remote access management software, such as Cobalt Strike, attackers have developed a broad range of tools with which to compromise and monetize compromised Linux systems.

The BlackMatter ransomware program is a variant of the program that was used against petrochemical distribution network Colonial Pipeline, while HelloKitty was originally a Windows-based version that expanded into the Linux world and is best known for its use in the attack on CD Projekt Red, makers of the Cyberpunk 2077 video game.

Other variants targeting Linux, and specifically Linux servers that host workloads, have become popular as well, [according to the report](#).

"Ransomware has recently evolved to target the Linux host images used to spin up workloads in virtualized environments," the report states. "This new and worrisome development shows how attackers look for the most valuable assets in cloud environments to inflict the maximum damage on their target."

The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) and its international partners also note the trend in a Feb. 9 advisory warning of specific ransomware threats. Among the most significant shifts seen in 2021 were the use of phishing to gain credentials, exploiting systems with insecure configurations via the remote desktop protocol (RDP), and attacks on cloud infrastructure, the international cybersecurity agencies stated.

"Ransomware developers targeted cloud infrastructures to exploit known vulnerabilities in cloud applications, virtual machine software, and virtual machine orchestration software," [the alert states](#).

"Ransomware threat actors also targeted cloud accounts, cloud application programming interfaces (APIs), and data backup and storage systems to deny access to cloud resources and encrypt data."

Attackers also are starting to use more sophisticated tools to manage their attacks on Linux infrastructure. Cobalt Strike is a Windows-focused attack management system used by red teams and penetration testers, but attackers are now using it in Linux campaigns, VMware's report states.

"CobaltStrike is becoming more prevalent because it is the most mature and formalized C2 [command-and-control] infrastructure out there," Baskin adds. "We are seeing it in increased usage by criminals, but we also see additional usage by some businesses [that] perhaps cannot afford a license."

The VMware investigation into Cobalt Strike servers found 14,000 servers by downloading the implants from the staging server and then deconstructing the information in the file to gather more specific information. The group found that one in six versions of the Cobalt Strike program had a customer ID of 0, indicating a trial version, but those are most likely cracked. Four other custom IDs accounted for nearly 40% of the remaining Cobalt Strike servers, indicating that protection on those instances had also been compromised.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 Most prolific year on record data breaches
SOURCE	https://www.helpnetsecurity.com/2022/02/09/2021-sensitive-data-breaches/?web_view=true

Spirion released a guide which provides a detailed look at sensitive [data breaches](#) in 2021 derived from analysis conducted against the Identity Theft Resource Center (ITRC) database of publicly reported data breaches in the United States.

The guide is based on the analysis of more than 1,500 data incidents that occurred in the United States during 2021 that specifically involved sensitive data, including personally identifiable information (PII). The report identifies the top sensitive data breaches by the number of individuals impacted, number of records compromised, threat actor, exposure vector, and types of sensitive data exposed by industry sector.

2021 was the most prolific year on record for data breaches, surpassing 2017's all-time high. Last year a total of 1,862 data compromises were reported by U.S. organizations—a 68 percent increase over 2020. ITRC data revealed that 83% of the year's incidents exposed 889 million sensitive data records that impacted more than 150 million individuals.

“While we have seen significant sensitive data targeting in previous years, a combination of the steady state of remote work and increased sophistication in attack methodologies caused sensitive data attacks to skyrocket during 2021,” said [Kevin Coppins](#), CEO, [Spirion](#).

The most common data targeted during sensitive data breaches last year

- **Social security number:** 65% of all sensitive data incidents involved SSN
- **Personal health information:** 41% of all sensitive data incidents
- **Bank account information:** 23% of all sensitive data
- **Driver's license:** 23% of all sensitive data
- **Credit/debit card details:** 12% of all sensitive data incidents
- **Email/password credentials:** 10% of all sensitive data incidents

The majority of sensitive data breaches were executed by external actors, accounting for 93 percent of total incidents. Targeted cyberattacks were the primary way external actors gained unauthorized access to personal data in 2021. External actors carried out more than 1,440 cyberattacks (89 percent of all sensitive data incidents), capturing the personal information of 148 million people.

Top attack vectors cyberattackers leveraged to access sensitive data

- **Third-party/supply chain vulnerabilities:** 25% of sensitive data [incidents](#) impacted 6.9 million individuals
- **Phishing/smishing/business email correspondence:** 23% of sensitive data [incidents](#) impacted 4.8 million individuals
- **Ransomware:** 17% of sensitive data [incidents](#) impacted 14 million individuals
- **Malware:** 8% of sensitive data [incidents](#) impacted 2.5 million individuals

Meanwhile, internal actors were responsible for 7 percent of sensitive data compromises that placed 878,556 people's PII at risk, largely through human error including email correspondence and misconfigured cloud security or firewalls.

In 2021 the average sensitive data breach had a lifecycle twice as long as non-sensitive data breaches. From initial detection to breach containment, the average sensitive data breach took 112 days to resolve, while a non-sensitive data breach only took 52 days. It also took twice as long to detect and contain internal errors as external cyberattacks. On average, the lifecycle of data exposure induced by human error took 207 days to detect and contain, whereas external attacks had an average lifecycle of 75 days.

Three industries were responsible for a majority of sensitive data breaches that impacted 84 percent of all individuals in 2021:

- **Professional and business services:** 157 incidents that impacted 52 million individuals (or 35% of total individuals)
- **Telecommunications:** 8 incidents that impacted 47.8 million individuals (or 32% of total individuals)
- **Healthcare:** 447 [incidents](#) that impacted 24.8 million individuals (or 17% of total individuals)

Interesting trends

Evolving attack vectors: Supply chain and third-party attacks became a top contributor to sensitive data compromises in 2021. A total of 93 third-party attacks impacted 559 organizations, exposing more than 1.1 billion data records. Of these incidents, 83% contained sensitive data, revealing PII for 7.2 million people. Notably, the healthcare industry was impacted in 53 percent of all the supply chain attacks in 2021.

Multiple attacks in a single year: More than two dozen organizations experienced multiple data breaches last year. From Aetna ACE's three data incidents to LinkedIn's two massive data leaks that affected 1.2 billion people, the emergence of this unsettling trend is a result of the increasing levels of remote work that is putting greater amounts of data at risk than ever before.

Under-reporting data breaches: Despite more organizations experiencing data compromises, however, 34 percent of organizations and state agencies underreported data breaches last year by not reporting their data incidents on a timely basis or failing to include relevant details. Although individual states require companies to notify customers of a breach, currently there are no blanket federal U.S. laws dictating that companies must report every data compromise.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 Malicious use Regsvr32 Windows utility
SOURCE	https://threatpost.com/cybercriminals-windows-utility-regsvr32-malware/178333/?web_view=true
GIST	<p>A Windows living-off-the-land binary (LOLBin) known as Regsvr32 is seeing a big uptick in abuse of late, researchers are warning, mainly spreading trojans like Lokibot and Qbot.</p> <p>LOLBins are legitimate, native utilities used daily in various computing environments, that cybercriminals use to evade detection by blending in to normal traffic patterns. In this case, Regsvr32 is a Microsoft-signed command line utility in Windows that allows users to register and unregister libraries. By registering a .DLL file, information is added to the central directory (the Registry) so that it can be used by Windows and shared among programs.</p> <p>This long reach is catnip to cyberattackers, who can abuse the utility via the “Squiblydoo” technique, Uptycs researchers warned.</p> <p>“Threat actors can use Regsvr32 for loading COM scriptlets to execute DLLs,” they explained in a Wednesday writeup. “This method does not make changes to the Registry as the COM object is not actually registered, but [rather] is executed. This technique [allows] threat actors to bypass application whitelisting during the execution phase of the attack kill chain.”</p> <p>The .OCX Connection</p> <p>Malicious use of Regsvr32 has been cresting of late in the Uptycs telemetry, researchers warned, with cybercrooks specifically attempting to register .OCX files in the Registry via various types of malicious Microsoft Office documents. As a class, .OCX files contain ActiveX controls, which are code blocks that Microsoft developed to enable applications to perform specific functions, such as displaying a calendar.</p> <p>“The Uptycs Threat Research team has observed more than 500+ malware samples using Regsvr32.exe to register [malicious] .OCX files,” researchers warned. “During our analysis of these malware samples, we have identified that some of the malware samples belonged to Qbot and Lokibot attempting to execute .OCX files...97 percent of these samples belonged to malicious Microsoft Office documents such as Excel spreadsheet files.”</p> <p>Most of the Microsoft Excel files observed in the attacks carry the .XLSM or .XLSB suffixes, they added, which are types that contain embedded macros. During the attack, these usually download or execute a malicious payload from the URL using the formulas in the macros.</p>

Similarly, some campaigns use Microsoft Word, Rich Text Format data or Composite Document (.DOC, .DOCX or .DOCM files embedded with malicious macros, according to Uptycs.

Identifying Suspicious regsvr32 Executions

Because Regsvr32, like other LOLBins, is used for legitimate daily operations, its abuse often evades traditional cybersecurity defenses. However, researchers noted that security teams can monitor for a couple of specific behaviors in order to track its activity:

- Look for parent/child process relationships where Regsvr32 is executed with parent process of Microsoft Word or Microsoft Excel;
- And, it can be identified by looking for Regsvr32 executions that load the scrobj.dll, which executes a COM scriptlet.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 Covid news fuels rise in cybercrime
SOURCE	https://www.scmagazine.com/analysis/cybercrime/covid-19-news-fuels-rise-in-domain-related-cybercrime-report-says?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>Recent CSC research highlights a continued rise in domain name registration activity over the last two years in correlation with ongoing COVID-19 themes. Data confirm that hackers leveraged the global pandemic for financial gain, a particular risk to healthcare entities given brand abuse and patient privacy or misinformation risk.</p> <p>Threat actors have long-preyed on ongoing news cycles and vulnerable periods to further their cybercrime efforts. But while fraudulent domain registrations are likely a nuisance to other sectors, healthcare entities should be on the alert for these instances, as it could lead to phishing, brand abuse, consumer privacy risks, and other nefarious activities.</p> <p>In 2020 and 2021, CSC extensively explored how the pandemic impacted online content, with a focus on domain name registration activity through its software-as-a-service (SaaS) cybersecurity platform.</p> <p>Over 478,000 domain names directly referencing key terms tied to the global pandemic were found by the researchers, “as bad actors took advantage of increased levels of COVID-related searches.”</p> <p>Researchers confirmed a direct pattern of peaks and valleys of domain registrations every time there was a COVID-19 news event. Domain-related cybercrime continues to rise, impacting brand owners, consumers, and the organization itself with ransomware and supply-chain vulnerabilities.</p> <p>These fraudulent sites were designed to harvest personal information, sell fraudulent products, launch phishing attacks, or distribute malware through email attachments or malicious mobile apps. Many of these trends were first examined by CSC in a 2021 report.</p> <p>Among the key trends most pressing to healthcare entities, COVID-19-related domain names containing Moderna, Pfizer, Centers for Disease Control, and other similar names. Researchers note for this dataset, they saw “trends with those commonly used by malicious third parties in conjunction with more egregious types of activity.”</p> <p>This is due to many branded domain names using the same infrastructure, such as domain registrars and DNS hosting providers, “as other previously identified harmful websites.” According to the report, “Bad actors use tactics such as domain parking and pay-per-click to disguise and then launch their attacks.”</p> <p>CSC previously identified an ongoing trend of fake domains targeting well known global brands through “brand variants in the form of homoglyphs.” For the COVID-19-specific data, the researchers identified over 350 domain names registered in the last two years that contained pandemic-related phrases, including the top three vaccine manufacturers or health entities.</p>

And more than 80% of those domains were registered to third parties, meaning not owned by the parties named in the domain. Of these domains, half were deemed dormant, the other half used for pay-per-click or advertising related schemes.

The activity is a potential red flag as it doesn't reflect how the domains may have already been used, nor how they'll be used in the future. Researchers noted the concern is heightened as one-third of the domains have active MX records configured, presenting a "launch pad for future malicious attacks."

"These observations shine a light on the risks faced by organizations in terms of the incorporation of their brands in infringing domain names," researchers explained. It's also a potential risk for patient privacy and misinformation concerns, as "brand names lend credibility to the domain name, creating an illusion of safety to a user interacting with web content."

These models were used across multiple threat avenues, including social media content, phishing attacks, and fraudulent marketplace offerings.

Healthcare entities that own the brand names used in fraudulent campaigns should consider directly requesting the content referencing their brand to be removed, researchers warned. It's not only a marketing concern, but an intellectual property issue, and "social media sites are generally expected to be compliant with requests for the removal of such content."

"The need for better standards and regulation would go a long way toward protecting companies and their cyber security posture, as well as their online brand presence and consumers' safety," researchers concluded.

[Return to Top](#)

Terror Conditions

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 Somalia: suicide bomber kills 6
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/car-bomb-targeting-somalia-election-delegates-kills-six-2022-02-10/
GIST	<p>MOGADISHU, Feb 10 (Reuters) - A suicide bomber targeting a minibus full of delegates involved in Somalia's parliamentary elections killed at least six people in Mogadishu on Thursday, the ambulance service said, while Al Qaeda-linked al Shabaab claimed responsibility for the attack</p> <p>The blast occurred early on Thursday while the vehicle was passing a busy junction on a road heading to the president's office in the capital of the East African nation.</p> <p>Abdikadir Abdirahman, director of Mogadishu's Aamin Ambulance Services, said its personnel carried six bodies from the scene. It was not immediately clear who the casualties were.</p> <p>A delegate on the bus said the passengers were unharmed.</p> <p>"We were in the bus passing the junction and I could see someone running towards the bus and police shouting at him 'stop' at gunpoint. Then we heard two gunshots and a blast," Saado Abdillahi, one of the delegates told Reuters.</p> <p>"We had passed already but I understand civilians were victims."</p> <p>Al Qaeda-linked al Shabaab, which aims to topple the central government and impose its own severe interpretation of Islamic law, claimed responsibility for the attack, saying it killed six delegates and five police officers.</p>

	<p>"A Mujaheed suicide bomber conducted an operation against a convoy of the apostate government. The target was the delegates selecting lawmakers," Abdiasis Abu Musab, al Shabaab's military operations spokesperson said.</p> <p>Somalia's elections for lawmakers began on Nov. 1 and were initially supposed to end on Dec. 24, but are currently due to be completed on Feb. 25. The attack on delegates may present an additional challenge to the election.</p> <p>According to Somalia's indirect electoral process, regional councils are meant to choose a senate. Delegates include clan elders who pick members of the lower house, which would then choose a new president at a date yet to be fixed.</p> <p>A months-long dispute between Somalia's Prime Minister Mohammed Hussein Roble and his political rival President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed has been blamed for the delayed parliamentary elections.</p> <p>So far 124 of 275 lawmakers have been elected, according to data from the election commission.</p> <p>Al Shabaab frequently carries out bombings and gun assaults in Mogadishu and elsewhere in Somalia.</p> <p>It also carries out attacks against African Union peacekeeping troops, and in neighbouring Kenya, in retaliation of the presence of its soldiers in the peacekeeping mission.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/09 Ontario teen sentenced 3yrs terror charges
SOURCE	https://www.castanet.net/edition/news-story-359519-4-.htm
GIST	<p>A Kingston, Ont., teen who pleaded guilty to terrorism-related charges has been sentenced to three years, with two years to be spent in custody and one in the community under supervision.</p> <p>Justice Elaine Deluzio says that's in addition to the two years the teen has already spent in custody.</p> <p>With the decision, Deluzio accepts a joint submission by the Crown and defence requesting the maximum youth sentence.</p> <p>Last year, prosecutors asked the court to sentence the teen as an adult, but they changed their position after reviewing evidence presented during the sentencing hearing, including reports suggesting the youth has made "significant rehabilitative efforts."</p> <p>Deluzio accepted that argument, noting that the teen finished Grade 12 while in custody, despite having only eight high school credits at the time of his arrest.</p> <p>She says he accomplished that "in the face of enormous obstacles" brought on in part by the COVID-19 pandemic.</p> <p>"(The teen) has served most of his time in detention during a worldwide pandemic, which has restricted his access to family," Deluzio said. "His access to in-person counselling and programming has also been very limited."</p> <p>The teen, who cannot be identified under the Youth Criminal Justice Act, was 16 when he was arrested by RCMP in January 2019 following a tip from the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation.</p> <p>An agreed statement of facts said the teen unwittingly communicated with an FBI undercover agent he believed to be a "lone wolf" terrorist in Virginia, and sent him instructions on how to build a pressure-cooker bomb.</p> <p>The statement said the teen also encouraged the agent to plant the bomb in a public place, such as a bar, to kill "enemies of Allah."</p>

	<p>No bomb was planted but the statement said a search of the youth's home found all the materials needed to create one.</p> <p>The youth pleaded guilty in 2020 to facilitating a terrorist activity, possession of an explosive substance with intent to injure or kill, taking action to cause an explosion and counselling another person to detonate an explosive device to cause injury or death.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/09 Illinois woman guilty plea domestic terror
SOURCE	https://www.wandtv.com/news/illinois-woman-pleads-guilty-to-charges-related-to-domestic-terrorism/article_73efba90-8a01-11ec-a17e-cf2acd250703.html
GIST	<p>URBANA, Ill. (WAND) - An Illinois woman who faces attempted arson and other charges related to domestic terrorism has pleaded guilty in federal court.</p> <p>Emily Claire Hari, 50, admitted to committing the crimes of conspiracy to interfere with commerce by threats and violence, attempted arson, unlawful possession of a machine gun and unlawful possession of a firearm by a felon. Hari will be sentenced on June 13 at the U.S. courthouse in Urbana.</p> <p>Prosecutors said Hari, who was previously known as Michael B. Hari, started a militia group in late 2017 called the "Patriot Freedom Fighters," which later went on to be called the "White Rabbits." Convicted conspirators Michael McWhorter, Joe Morris, Ellis J. Mack and Wesley Johnson were also involved.</p> <p>The conspirators were involved in a number of crimes. As part of their activities, they obtained materials used to make incendiary devices and acquired/assembled four shotguns and four assault rifles. Some of the weapons were fully automatic. Prosecutors said the conspirators had the weapons and termite stored in a locked safe at their "office" in Clarence.</p> <p>Authorities said Hari, McWhorter, Morris and Johnson were involved in attempting to use a pipe bomb at the Women's Health Practice building in Champaign on Nov. 7, 2017. They traveled to the building, where prosecutors said Morris broke a window and put the bomb inside. It did not go off, and on the morning of Nov. 7, a receptionist saw it and called police.</p> <p>With Hari's approval, the conspirators traveled on Dec. 16, 2017 from Clarence to a home in Ambia, Ind., to try and rob a Hispanic person they thought was involved in drug trafficking. Prosecutors said the conspirators were robbed and pretended to be law enforcement executing a search warrant. After forcing entry, they handcuffed and zip-tied residents, causing injury to the wrists of one of the zip-tied people. They left and returned to Clarence after searching for cash and drugs.</p> <p>Two times in December 2017, several conspirators went to WalMart stores in Illinois (Watseka and Mt. Vernon) to try and get money. Prosecutors said they went inside with dangerous weapons and confronted cashiers.</p> <p>Hari, McWhorter and Morris went on Jan. 17, 2018 to a location near Effingham, where they tried to sabotage railroad tracks owned by the Canadian National Railway with what prosecutors called an incendiary device. After the attempted sabotage, they sent a demand via an anonymous email to the railway threatening there would be more damage if the railroad did not pay about \$190,000 in cryptocurrency.</p> <p>On Feb. 18, 2018, the conspirators placed bomb-making materials, along with a pipe bomb, on the property of a Clarence resident to try to get them in trouble before a court hearing in Ford County. In this hearing, Hari faced criminal charges for allegedly assaulting this person in June 2017. Hari then sent an anonymous "tip" to authorities said explosive devices were in a suitcase and gray bag in a shed on the property. The FBI responded and found multiple explosive devices, along with a pipe bomb that was attached to a small green propane tank, in the shed.</p>

	<p>The conspirators then became concerned the FBI might find their office and take their weapons. Prosecutors said Hari and McWhorter moved those weapons, including machine guns, to the residence of another militia group member in Clarence. The weapons were seized, and prosecutors said McWhorter, Morris and Mack then fled Clarence to hide in the woods and in abandoned barns.</p> <p>Hari is in the custody of the U.S. Marshals Service. He was convicted in December 2020 of charges related to an August 2017 firebombing of a Minnesota mosque, along with McWhorter and Morris. On those charges, a federal judge in Minnesota sentenced Hari to 53 years in prison.</p> <p>For the attempted arson charge, Hari faces five to 20 years in prison. She faces a maximum of 20 years behind bars for conspiracy to interfere with commerce by threats and violence and a 10-year maximum sentence for the firearm charges.</p> <p>This case was investigated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation in Springfield. The government was represented in prosecution by Supervisory Assistant U.S. Attorney Eugene L. Miller in the Central District of Illinois.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/09 Assessment: Super Bowl 'attractive target'
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/09/politics/super-bowl-terrorism-target-no-specific-credible-threat/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN) Law enforcement is on high alert ahead of Sunday's Super Bowl and remains concerned about the sustained interest that international and domestic terrorists, as well as lone offenders have in targeting mass gatherings, according to a joint threat assessment obtained by CNN.</p> <p>But the multiple federal, state and local agencies that contributed to the threat assessment, found "no information to indicate a specific, credible threat to or associated with" the event at SoFi Stadium in Inglewood, California.</p> <p>"Super Bowl LVI is a potentially attractive target due to the high concentration of attendees and significant media attention the event will receive," the assessment says of the international terrorism threat.</p> <p>ISIS and other foreign terrorist organizations routinely promote attacks in Europe and the United States in their online messaging videos and publications, according to the report.</p> <p>The assessment, dated February 3, comes as the Department of Homeland Security updated its national public terrorism bulletin, warning that the spread of conspiracy theories and disinformation is fueling the "heightened threat" environment in the US.</p> <p>Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said Tuesday that there is no specific, credible threat to the Super Bowl.</p> <p>"We have no information of a specific, credible threat against this Super Bowl. What this is all about is planning and preparation to prevent any incident from occurring," he said.</p> <p>Because the Super Bowl takes place in different locations each year, security plans and perimeters change with each game.</p> <p>"SoFi campus is just such a massive campus," Cathy Lanier, NFL chief security officer, said. "Of all the Super Bowls that I've worked, the biggest challenge here, really, is just the enormity of this event, and that goes along with the enormity of the stadium and the stadium campus."</p> <p>"The Super Bowl, or any mass gathering event, remains an attractive target for hackers, criminals, and terrorists," Brian Harrell, former assistant secretary for infrastructure protection at DHS, told CNN, noting that security coordination "comes at an important time given the significant amount of violence we have seen recently in the streets of America."</p>

Homegrown violent extremists and unaffiliated lone offenders are a "particular concern," the assessment says, due to their ability to remain undetected until operational, willingness to attack civilians and soft targets, and ability to inflict significant casualties with minimal specialized knowledge, access or training.

'No Drone Zone'

Unmanned Aircraft Systems or drones also have the potential to disrupt law enforcement and security operations, the report says.

The Federal Aviation Administration designated the Los Angeles area a ["No Drone Zone"](#) for the Super Bowl, prohibiting drones within a 30-nautical-mile radius of the stadium up to 18,000 feet in altitude from 2:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. PT on February 13.

Other potential threats include cybersecurity, weapons of mass, food safety and criminal concerns, such as human trafficking, theft and fraud schemes.

Cyber criminals are attracted to target high-profile special events and possible targets include spectators, sponsors, local governments and businesses, athletes and event organizers, according to the report.

"Cyber criminals could use a variety of tactics, techniques, and procedures, including ransomware, social engineering campaigns, denial-of-service attacks, network intrusions by point-of-sale, or malware to target the event," the assessment says.

"A successful attack would likely receive widespread publicity, a goal of many threat actors," it adds.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 Twitter activity link to synagogue attack?
SOURCE	https://news.yahoo.com/apos-lady-al-qaeda-apos-200049450.html
GIST	<p>EXCLUSIVE: Researchers say they've uncovered a coordinated spike in Twitter activity sympathetic to the convicted terrorist "Lady Al Qaeda" Aafia Siddiqui leading up to the hostage crisis at Texas' Congregation Beth Israel, where an Islamic extremist demanded her release from a U.S. prison.</p> <p>Malik Faisal Akram, a 44-year-old British national, flew to New York and made his way to Texas, buying a Taurus G2C pistol along the way before taking four hostages at the synagogue in Colleyville. Before the hostages escaped and law enforcement killed him, he demanded Siddiqui's release from custody in Fort Worth, where she's serving an 86-year sentence for shooting at Americans in Afghanistan.</p> <p>In the five months ahead of the synagogue attack, pro-Siddiqui tweets surged, according to new research released by the Combat Anti-Semitism Movement (CAM) and conducted by the Network Contagion Research Institute (NCRI). They were attributed to both "bot-like activity and a network of influencers amplifying anti-Semitic content."</p> <p>Twitter said Wednesday morning that it was investigating the information uncovered in the report.</p> <p>"The well-coordinated online and offline solidarity campaign for Aafia Siddiqui, a raving anti-Semite herself, indulged in anti-Semitic tropes and predictably inflamed supporters," Elan Carr, a former U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism and member of CAM's advisory council, said in a statement first provided to Fox News Digital. "While one can never determine a direct cause and effect, tragically, one of those radicalized supporters flew all the way from England to Texas to visit terror on an innocent Jewish community during Shabbat services."</p> <p>The data, which NCRI said it collected from publicly available information, shows "the cause Akram identified as a key motive for his attack had been promoted by a U.S.-based nonprofit organization and self-identified Pakistani Twitter accounts in the months before the attack," the report reads.</p>

"It gives me some pause for concerns," Jack Donohue, a former NYPD Chief of Strategic Initiatives and a co-author of the report, told Fox News Digital.

While there was some evidence of bot activity, the researchers noted that the campaign included real people and also preceded a real-world demonstration calling for Siddiqui's release -- a Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) rally outside the prison.

At the rally, a speaker railed against "Zionist judges" and another CAIR leader lambasted "Zionist synagogues" in November.

Akram's brother, Gulbar Akram, condemned online extremists for indoctrinating his brother ahead of the hostage crisis.

"He wasn't an angel, but if these religious nuts hadn't got a hold of him, this would never have happened," he told The Sun last month.

Siddiqui is serving an 86-year prison sentence for shooting at U.S. service members. She had been arrested in connection with an alleged Al Qaeda plot before she grabbed a soldier's M4 and opened fire on her interrogators. She missed.

Donohue said that while the researchers didn't dig up any direct evidence linking the Twitter campaign to Akram's motivations, the correlation is concerning and should be worth digging into. Carr also noted that studies have shown radicalization can actually happen faster online.

"The information that we have in this report is absolutely worthwhile for the investigating agencies to take notice of," he told Fox News Digital. "The investigative agencies... really do have to run this sort of information down to help identify the motivation."

David Grantham, a law enforcement professional with the Tarrant County Sheriff's Office and author of "[Consequences: An Intelligence Officer's War](#)," said that police can also learn lessons from the case to improve their ability to thwart future attacks.

"If we see these trends in the future, anything like this, we need to consider that there could be violent action associated with this organized online activity," he told Fox News Digital. "So that's the most basic fundamental thing that law enforcement will look at from this report."

But also, it indicated that the attack may have been more organized than it initially appeared.

"It's doubtful that it was merely a coincidence, merely a mentally disturbed, emotionally disturbed person who randomly chose a synagogue," Grantham said. "This synagogue is in a residential area -- you would have to find it. You wouldn't stumble across it, and there are plenty of synagogues closer to the prison where 'Lady Al Qaeda' is being held."

But whether or not Akram had additional organizational help plotting the incident, Grantham said the case as a whole shows that online activity can lead to real-world violence.

It's a message that CAM is stressing along with the release of the report.

"Words matter," Carr told Fox News Digital. "Antisemitic words aren't harmless, they might be protected by the First Amendment, and I'm not suggesting that they be censored, but they're not harmless. They do real damage. That's take away No. 1. Take away No. 2 is that social media is remarkably effective and impactful."

It's especially concerning with millions of people more focused on the internet in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and its lockdowns, he said.

NCRI's report, based on publicly available Twitter data, spotted a blip of activity sympathetic to Siddiqui in September and then a massive spike in January. Many of the accounts, including the 20 most active ones, self-identified as Pakistani, according to the researchers.

Akram attacked the synagogue on Jan. 15.

"Aafia" was barely mentioned on Twitter in recent years – less than 20 times a day until late 2021. But in August, activity climbed to thousands of mentions a day, the report's authors wrote. In September, the Texas branch of CAIR organized a protest outside Siddiqui's prison following an alleged jailhouse assault.

The Twitter account NCRI identified as the most prolific advocate for freeing Siddiqui, @MajidNA1188, was still active as of Tuesday evening.

The account has promoted the push for Siddiqui's freedom more than 1,100 times over the past year and has referred to Israel as a "criminal terrorist organization," according to the report. As recently as Tuesday the account retweeted a video arguing that Siddiqui was innocent.

Donohue said the NCRI began looking into the incident after President Biden was confronted by reporters asking whether the synagogue attack had been an incident of terrorism.

"He asked, why did he target a synagogue, and why he insisted on the release of someone who's been imprisoned for over 10 years," Donohue said. "We discovered an unexpected potential answer to the president's question."

And if it happened in Texas, it could happen anywhere, Carr said.

"This is a major question of our day, a major public policy challenge of our time," he said.

How can local communities prepare themselves for real threats that may originate online and overseas?

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 Violence erupts Syria camp for ISIS families
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/09/world/middleeast/syria-camp-violence.html
GIST	<p>QAMISHLI, Syria — At a detention camp in northeastern Syria where tens of thousands of family members of Islamic State fighters have been held for years, guards opened fire on residents this week after women and children attacked them with rocks and knives, according to a top security commander for the region.</p> <p>One child was killed in the shooting on Monday and several women and children were wounded, the commander, Newroz Ahmed, told The New York Times on Tuesday.</p> <p>It was the first time that guards in the sprawling Al Hol camp had fired on children, but only the latest episode of violence in a dangerous place that ISIS has increasingly infiltrated.</p> <p>“Al Hol is now out of control,” said Abdulkarim Omar, an official with the administration of the Kurdish-led breakaway region in northeastern Syria that encompasses the camp.</p> <p>The violence at Al Hol erupted at a time of escalating tensions in the region between the area’s dominant military power, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, or S.D.F., and resurgent ISIS militants.</p> <p>The camp has been under heightened alert since an ISIS attack on a prison in the northeastern city of Hasaka, Syria, last month. Officials from the S.D.F., which is backed by the United States, have said that the ISIS plan was to free prisoners, then to move on to take control of Al Hol camp and other areas,</p>

hoping to gain a territorial toehold to try to re-establish their self-declared caliphate, which they lost three years ago. It took the S.D.F. almost two weeks to retake full control of the prison.

Days later, American commandos launched a daring raid on another part of northern Syria, Idlib Province, and killed the leader of ISIS, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi.

In the violence on Monday at Al Hol, Ms. Ahmed said security guards opened fire in a part of the camp that houses foreigners after a group of women and children attacked them with rocks and knives in an attempt to seize their guns. She and a camp official said the security forces were responding to a tent fire, possibly set deliberately to lure the forces into the foreigners' annex.

"They tried to take the weapons from the security forces," Ms. Ahmed said. "That's why they attacked."

The overcrowded and impoverished Al Hol camp holds almost 60,000 people, most of them children, who have been detained there since 2019. About 10,000 of them are non-Arab foreigners — almost all of them women and children — and the rest are mostly Syrian or Iraqi.

[The administration of the breakaway region](#) and the S.D.F. have long warned that they are unable to adequately secure the camp. The forces conduct regular sweeps, checking for weapons and seizing cellphones. Ms. Ahmed, an S.D.F. commander, said they have found rifles, pistols and even machine guns.

Over the past year, the camp has been the scene of increasing ISIS violence, according to officials and aid workers in northeastern Syria.

Mr. Omar, the head of foreign relations for the regional administration, said that the S.D.F. had cracked down on sleeper cells in the camp, but that ISIS was still active there.

Most of the women there were married to ISIS fighters, and Ms. Ahmed and camp officials say ISIS cells run by women have thrived in the camp.

The violence broke out in a section of the camp housing about 10,000 women and children, most of them from Eastern Europe and Central Asia, as well as from dozens of other countries [that have refused to repatriate them](#).

Thousands of other women and children, many from Western countries, have been moved to a smaller detention camp as Al Hol has grown more dangerous over the past year.

The security forces involved in the shooting included members of a female militia under the S.D.F. command that Ms. Ahmed oversees, as well as members of the region's internal security force, which is under the control of the regional Interior Ministry.

Ms. Ahmed said that one child was shot dead and that two other children and three women were wounded. One member of the security forces was also injured.

Killings are not unusual inside Al Hol, but they almost always involve ISIS members targeting camp residents and camp officials. [The United Nations has said that about 90 Syrian](#) and Iraqi camp residents have been killed over the past year, most of them by ISIS militants living inside the camp.

The Kurdish Red Crescent medical aid organization said one of its Syrian staff members was killed last month while working at the camp.

Save The Children, one of the few international aid organizations that operates in Al Hol, said it was "appalled at the news that at least one child has been killed and others injured after security forces opened fire" in the camp.

	<p>“This latest incident is a stark reminder of the dangers that children face every day in the camp,” said Sonia Kush, the director of the group’s Syria Response unit. “Their governments need to take them and their families home to safety immediately.”</p> <p>The child who was killed was a boy from Turkmenistan and his age was unknown, one aid official said, speaking on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to talk publicly about it. The two wounded children were 8 and 10, the official said.</p> <p>Almost all of the camp residents were detained after ISIS fell three years ago, when tens of thousands of fighters and their families emerged from the ruins of the town of Baghuz, Syria.</p> <p>Ms. Ahmed said that in the absence of rehabilitation programs, many of the children in Al Hol camp have become increasingly radicalized by the women raising them.</p> <p>“They always say, ‘It is our duty to raise our children in the ideology of the caliphate,’” she said.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/09 UK reduces terrorism threat level
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/uk-terrorism-threat-level-reduced-severe-substantial-pa-media-2022-02-09/
GIST	<p>LONDON, Feb 9 (Reuters) - Britain's national terrorism threat level has been reduced from severe to substantial, interior minister Priti Patel said in a written statement to parliament.</p> <p>The change means an attack is considered likely rather than highly likely.</p> <p>The Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC) had classified the risk as severe following two terrorist attacks in quick succession, in October and November 2021.</p> <p>On Wednesday, Patel said: "JTAC judges that, despite these two attacks, the current nature and scale of the UK terrorist threat is consistent with the level of threat seen prior to the attacks."</p> <p>"The attacks in October and November 2021 reflect the complex, volatile, and unpredictable nature of the terrorist threat in the UK."</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/09 Main suspect Paris attacks trial testifies
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/09/i-did-not-kill-anyone-says-salah-abdeslam-main-suspect-in-paris-attacks-trial
GIST	<p>The main surviving suspect on trial over the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris took the stand for the first time on Wednesday, telling a court that he had never killed or wounded anyone and was not a danger to the public.</p> <p>Salah Abdeslam is suspected of being a member of a group of jihadists who carried out a coordinated series of bombings and shootings across the French capital that left 130 people dead and hundreds of others injured.</p> <p>Called to be cross-examined for the first time in the marathon trial, he said: “I did not kill anyone and I did not injure anyone. I didn’t inflict so much as a scratch on anyone. It’s important for me to say this.”</p> <p>He added: “What I can tell you is that I am not a danger to society.”</p> <p>The 32-year-old is suspected of planning to blow himself up in a suicide attack in Paris’s northern 18th arrondissement but backing out at the last minute. Police found an explosive vest they believe to have been his in a rubbish bin.</p>

He told the court his current imprisonment while on trial had led him to reflect on whether she should have blown himself up in the attacks. "When you are in prison in isolation, watched 24 hours a day, harassed 24 hours a day, treated like shit you ask yourself, was I right to back out, should I have gone right to the end," he said.

Abdeslam told the court he had never been in direct contact with Islamic State but decided to support the group after western states, including France, carried out bombing raids in Syria. He said he had been brought up a moderate Muslim in the religious sense but had not been aware of political or military associations with the religion until then.

He said his brother and his best friend, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, a Belgian-Moroccan believed to have been the "operational chief" of the attacks, had gone to Syria to fight the regime of Bashar al-Assad, but the bombings "changed everything" and prompted Islamic State to consider European targets.

The lead judge, Jean-Louis Périès, asked him whether, given how many people died in the Paris attacks, it had been "reasonable" for him to think the attacks would change French politics.

"Perhaps it would not make a difference," Abdeslam replied, suggesting that the attacks were a tit-for-tat response to the killing of civilians in Syria. "What I find serious is when Mr François Hollande came here and said that if he had to go back he would do the same thing, which didn't shock anyone here except me ... I say, it's because of him we are here today."

The judge responded: "We're not here to judge France or the French parliament."

Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attacks on 13 November 2015, which began at about 9pm with the detonation of a suicide bomb at the Stade de France stadium and continued with a number of drive-by shootings and bombings at busy cafes and restaurants in the capital, and a massacre at the Bataclan concert hall.

Apart from a number of outbursts at the opening of the trial last September, Abdeslam has remained silent since his arrest. On Wednesday he engaged in a verbal sparring match with Périès, telling him at one point: "Let's take a deep breath."

Abdeslam told the court his support for sharia law included the idea that non-Muslims could be either freed, killed or held in slavery. "Yes, we can do this in the Qur'an," he said. When the judge expressed astonishment and said this was not other Muslims' view of Islam, he responded: "That is their vision of Islam. We can live our religion as we want. We are not going to change our religion to please others."

Asked by a defence lawyer how he had turned from a moderate believer to a jihadist, he replied it was out of "the fear of God, of hell, of God's punishment. When I saw my brothers were massacred ... I had to do something for the cause.

"I was brought up to make the most of life and I was young and that is what I was doing. I didn't pay enough attention to the saviour and religion. It's when I knew what happened in Syria I became interested."

Abdeslam, a Brussels-born French national, is accused of being key to the international logistics operation bringing jihadists back to Europe from Syria, where they had been fighting.

He was arrested in March 2016, after a four-month manhunt, in a shootout with Belgian police in the Brussels suburb of Molenbeek-Saint-Jean. Days after he was taken into custody, suicide bombers suspected of being part of the same terrorist cell struck at Brussels airport and the city's Metro system, killing 32 and injuring hundreds.

Statements were read from Abdeslam's mother, sister Myriam and ex-fiancé Yasmina who decided not to give evidence in person.

	<p>Myriam said she thought her two brothers Salah and the older Brahim, were skiing in Germany at the time of the Paris attacks. Brahim was one of the jihadists and blew himself up in a café on Boulevard Voltaire.</p> <p>Yasmina, Abdeslam's fiancé at the time of the attacks, described her horror of learning of Abdeslam's involvement in the attacks.</p> <p>"Everyone saw him as kind, respectful, sociable. We were together eight or nine years. He never spoke about politics until a bit towards the end when he spoke about Syria. He was not a practising Muslim and he didn't follow Ramadan."</p> <p>She said Abdeslam often went out at night without her, that he drank alcohol and would smoke joints.</p> <p>The marathon legal process is the biggest ever criminal trial in France. Fourteen suspects are in the dock and another six people are being tried in their absence, five of them presumed dead in Iraq or Syria; the last is in prison in Turkey.</p> <p>Abdeslam will face further cross-examination on Thursday. The trial is expected to last nine months.</p>
Return to Top	

Suspicious, Unusual

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 FAA: 28 planes hit by lasers near SEA
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/faa-nearly-2-dozen-flights-hit-with-lasers-near-sea-this-week
GIST	<p>SEATAC, Wash. - The Federal Aviation Administration is investigating after crews from nearly three dozen flights reported getting hit with a laser near Seattle-Tacoma International Airport within the last three weeks.</p> <p>This comes after four flights reported being struck by a green laser near SEA on Jan. 28.</p> <p>FOX 13 News reached out to the FAA about the most recent strikes.</p> <p>The FAA told FOX 13 News that crews from six flights reported getting hit by a green laser between 5:59-7:52 p.m. on Wednesday, Feb. 9.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5:59 p.m.: Delta Air Lines Flight 1037 at 5,000 feet altitude approximately 1 mile east-southeast of the airport • 7:39 p.m.: American Airlines Flight 2009 at 1,500 feet altitude approximately 3 miles north of the airport • 7:40 p.m.: Volaris Airlines Flight 896 at 2,000 feet altitude approximately 6 miles north of the airport • 7:42 p.m.: Alaska Airlines Flight 508 at 2,000 feet altitude approximately 5 miles northwest of the airport • 7:45 p.m.: SkyWest Airlines Flight 3934 at 1,700 feet altitude approximately 3 miles north of the airport • 7:52 p.m.: Alaska Airlines Flight 751 at 1,000 feet altitude approximately 2.5 miles north of the airport <p>On Tuesday, Feb. 8, crews from 11 flights reported being "illuminated" by a laser near the airport between 8-10:30 p.m.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alaska Airlines Flight 1135, a Boeing 737, three miles from the airport. • Horizon Flight 2598, a De Havilland DH8D, three miles from the airport. • jetBlue Airlines Flight 263, an Airbus A321, three miles from the airport. • Alaska Airlines Flight 76, a Boeing 737, one mile from the airport. • Delta Air Lines Flight 1290, a Boeing 737, two miles from the airport.

- Horizon Flight 2567, a De Havilland DH8D, three miles from the airport.
- Southwest Airlines Flight 1192, a Boeing 737, three miles from the airport.
- Alaska Airlines 712, a Boeing 737, three miles from the airport.
- Aeromexico Flight 494, a Boeing 737, three miles from the airport.
- Delta Air Lines Flight 2471, a Boeing 737, three miles from the airport.
- American Airlines Flight 2009, an Airbus A321, three miles from the airport.

The Federal Aviation Administration said that four flights reported being hit by a green laser near the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport on Jan. 28.

On Monday, Feb. 7, 11 flight crews reported being hit by a laser near SEA between 8-9 p.m.

- Alaska Airlines Flight 754, a Boeing 739, five miles southeast of the airport.
- Alaska Airlines Flight 746, a Boeing 739, eight miles northwest of the airport.
- Alaska Air Flight 1107, a Boeing 738, five miles northwest of the airport.
- Alaska Airlines Flight 3, a Boeing 738, one mile north of the airport.
- Alaska Airlines Flight 688, an Airbus A320, five miles northwest of the airport.
- Alaska Airlines Flight 113, a Boeing 739, southeast of the airport.
- Southwest Airlines Flight 724, a Boeing 738, five miles northwest of the airport.
- Horizon Flight 2570, an Embraer 175L, five miles northwest of the airport.
- Horizon Airlines Flight 2125, De Havilland DH8D, five miles southeast of the airport.
- Delta Air Lines Flight 1712, a Boeing 178, four miles north of the airport.
- Delta Air Lines Flight 1334, a Boeing 738, five miles southeast of the airport.

All planes landed without incident, officials said.

No injuries have been reported and local authorities have been notified.

The FAA said people who shine lasers at an aircraft can face fines of up to \$11,000 per violation and up to \$30,800 for multiple laser incidents.

In 2021, the FAA issued \$120,000 in fines for laser strikes.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/10 Seals dying in droves South Africa coast
SOURCE	https://www.greenwichtime.com/news/article/Seals-are-dying-in-droves-along-South-Africa-s-16847094.php
GIST	<p>WESTERN CAPE, South Africa - The tourist, in her sandals, flower-print shirt and floppy sun hat, was concentrating on keeping a sure footing. The boulders on this desolately beautiful stretch of coastline were jagged and slippery.</p> <p>Then, she looked up.</p> <p>Before her was a breathtakingly grisly scene: six dead seals lined up in a row, one splayed open to reveal its inner workings, bright red blood collecting in pools and trickling down to the crashing waves below. A motley crew of younger women huddled over the carcasses. But the tourist didn't seem fazed.</p> <p>"What a shame," she said. "Pardon me for being nosy, but do you know what's killing them?"</p> <p>Tess Gridley, a scientist who doesn't study seals normally but has taken it upon herself to find out what's been killing thousands of the animals along southern Africa's Atlantic coast over the past six months, looked between the tourist and dead seals in front of her.</p> <p>"That's what we're trying to figure out," Gridley said. The seals were some of more than 50 she has necropsied on the region's beaches.</p>

Marine species on the coasts around Cape Town are facing multiple crises. A bird flu outbreak last year took out nearly a fifth of an endangered cormorant population in South Africa. Local penguin numbers are declining precipitously, in part because overfishing is depleting their sources of food. Further north, in Angola, fish stocks are plummeting as climate change rapidly warms the ocean.

But seals? Who cares about seals? Most fishermen certainly don't - the mischievous creatures snack on their catch. And while they may be cute, they aren't endangered, not even close. Furthermore, seal mortality is famously high - as much as 40% of pups don't survive. So who's to say that the current die-off is even abnormal?

Gridley, 40, is convinced this is abnormal, and a mystery worth solving that has potential implications reaching far beyond seals.

"Seals are just gone from whole areas of coast, and no one has batted an eye," she said. "I'm filling a gap because it seems nobody else will."

It is understandable why endangered bird populations get attention. Bird flu can jump to mammal populations and, at worst, turn into a pandemic. More commonly, it can infect poultry and ostriches, both of which factor heavily into the South African diet and economy.

But Gridley's leading theory for what's killing the seals is also a toxin that in high concentrations can pose a threat to humans and their food.

Domoic acid, released in some algae blooms, is ingested by plankton and then moves up the food chain through shellfish and anchovies and so on. In humans, it can cause what is called amnesic shellfish poisoning, which, as the name suggests, primarily affects memory, but also balance, and can be fatal.

Domoic acid poisoning has been linked in peer-reviewed studies to sea lion die-offs in California. In some instances, the animals were seen stumbling, bewildered, along coastal roads, their memory and balance seemingly gone.

"There are huge parallels" between California and South Africa, said Frances Gulland, commissioner of the U.S. Marine Mammal Commission. "And that's concerning in part because the economic impacts were massive in California. When domoic acid spiked in samples, the whole shellfish industry shut down for months."

In the late 1990s, Gulland and other researchers faced a similar mystery to Gridley's, but publicity and public interest in the sea lion die-off led to a spate of funding for research that ultimately proved domoic acid's treacherous but largely invisible threat to marine populations. It also helped describe how warming waters and increased agricultural runoff led to more harmful algal blooms.

Through a U.S. government-funded program called Mussel Watch, California now regularly tests ocean water and marine organisms for domoic acid and other toxins, and has tied the legality of seafood harvests and sales to toxin levels found in those samples.

South Africa lacks that kind of long-term study, said Grant Pitcher, a specialist scientist at the South African government's fisheries, forests and environment department. The capacity to test for the toxin is also unavailable in South Africa.

Much of the suspicion that domoic acid is to blame in South Africa is based on odd behavior by South African seals similar to what was seen in California before they die, Pitcher said.

"We know the same problematic species producing toxins predominate here as in California, and the timing of algae blooms has coincided with the seals dying," he said. "As for the seals dying, we really don't have much monitoring or sampling beyond what Tess is doing."

Gridley is systematically trying to get to the bottom of South Africa's seal die-off, roping in veterinarians, algae experts and chemists who donate their spare time.

Gridley and her husband are whale and dolphin experts - Gridley focuses on bioacoustics, how those animals communicate - and are largely self-funding the seal work with the help of online donations. Gridley's 77-year-old father takes quasi-forensic photos of the dead seals. Interns lug equipment and label jars of seal organs preserved in formaldehyde for testing later on. She's largely taught herself how to cut open a seal, and brings some of them, kept cool on bags of ice, to her home outside Cape Town, where necropsies are easier than among the boulders.

"My kids are so tired of dead seals," she said, wincing. "They are so over it."

The die-off began last September. High tides coughed up dozens of dead seals per mile. Even if many people along the coast have mixed feelings about seals, it has been a shocking - and pungent - event. Concerned citizens eventually found Gridley, most via social media, where Gridley's nonprofit, Sea Search, is active.

"I walk a lot along the beach with my dogs," said Marianne Franck, 70, a recent retiree. "One day, I found 40 of the dead seals. They were on top of each other, just, like, you know, dumped there. Oh, the stench! And the maggots! And the pups who had survived crying like little lambs. And all you can do is just say goodbye."

A regular Monday morning for Gridley now includes receiving a stream of images of dead seals from vigilant volunteers up and down the coastline. She might then go survey one stretch or the other. Some days there are dozens of carcasses, some fresh, others picked up by beach cleaners and left in wheelbarrows with plastic bags over their heads, yet more presumably swept back into the sea by large swells.

The particular kind of seal that's been dying - the Cape fur seal - is thought to number around 2 million. Their large population contributes to the lack of urgency in studying them. Funding around the cormorant die-off, for instance, has been easier to come by.

"We've been able to do PCR tests on hundreds of the birds," said David Roberts, a clinical veterinarian at the Southern African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds. The government has also participated more actively. Thousands of sick cormorants were euthanized before they could pass along the flu, many of them by having their necks manually broken before being discarded in garbage bags. There were days last September when more than 500 were being found dead, Roberts said.

"Seals are much harder to handle. You need a big truck, multiple people to carry them, maybe even a stretcher," he said. "If the seals had been dying of bird flu, it would have been emergency. But we don't think that's the case."

Proving domoic acid poisoning is a particularly difficult endeavor anywhere, but especially in South Africa. The acid disappears from a dead animal within hours of death, so freshly dead specimens are essential. Even with volunteers sending images, luck plays a huge part in the process. The acid also causes the seals to vomit, which can decrease the presence of the acid in the stomach, making it harder to find.

Because there are no testing facilities in South Africa, Gridley has planned on sending some of her preserved samples to Britain or the United States. Brains and other organs require permits to ship internationally because they are animal parts, but seal feces can be sent without one. ("Sending poo, well, that's easy!" she remarked, excitedly.)

The likelihood that one factor - domoic acid, in this case - is solely to blame is unlikely. With climate change and overfishing dramatically reshaping marine ecosystems, the answer is almost always multifactorial.

"We have to be really sure its domoic acid before we say that publicly," said Gridley. "It has the potential to cause real alarm, so we're not rushing to any conclusions."

Due diligence likely means at least dozens more necropsies.

It is not just grim work, but it is hard. On a recent, blazingly hot morning, Gridley clambered among the boulders bleached white by gull droppings toward two seals lying motionless. One was just in a deep slumber, and bolted awake, as if from a dream, to find an equally shocked human peering at it.

The other, however, was dead. Gridley and three interns dragged it toward the shade of a boulder, holding it by its fins and neck skin. They laid it next to five others.

"OK, ladies, let's get systematic about this. Lay them out in order of freshness," she said, gravely. And then, knife in hand, to herself: "Alright Tess, just get this done."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 Alarm: plastic lost in cargo ship disasters
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/feb/09/cargo-ship-disasters-are-oil-spills-of-our-time-because-of-health-risk-from-plastic
GIST	<p>Container ship accidents at sea should be considered the “oil spills of our time”, warned environmental organisations that found a toxic mix of metals, carcinogenic and other harmful chemicals on plastic washed up on Sri Lanka’s beaches after a cargo ship fire.</p> <p>When the X-Press Pearl sank off nine nautical miles off Colombo, Sri Lanka’s capital, in May 2021, the most “significant harm” from the country’s worst maritime disaster initially came from the spillage of 1,680 tonnes of plastic pellets, or “nurdles”, into the Indian Ocean. They were found in dead dolphins, fish and on beaches – in some places 2 metres deep. A UN report called it the “single largest plastic spill” in history.</p> <p>But a new study, from Sri Lanka’s Centre for Environmental Justice (CEJ) and the International Pollutants Elimination Network (IPEN), a coalition of NGOs in 124 countries, said the nurdle spill was the “tip of the iceberg” of environmental harm from the accident.</p> <p>Researchers analysed samples of nurdles and burnt lumps of plastic from four Sri Lankan beaches for heavy metals and various chemicals, including benzotriazole UV-stabilisers, which are used to prevent discoloration in plastics, bisphenols and polyaromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs).</p> <p>They found heavy metals as well as chemicals that both cause cancer and are “endocrine-disrupting”, or interfering with hormones. Of particular concern, they said, were levels of PAHs found on the burnt lumps, which far exceeded safe limits for consumer products set by the EU. For some substances, no level of exposure is considered safe.</p> <p>Dr Therese Karlsson, a science adviser at IPEN and co-author of the study, said: “Until now, there hasn’t been any publicly available chemical analysis of the spill. The chemicals have largely been overlooked because they are not visible.”</p> <p>While the nurdle spillage was “catastrophic”, Karlsson said, it was “the tip of the iceberg” due to the chemicals present – in particular BPA, which is used to make plastic and epoxy resins.</p> <p>“We found bisphenol-A (BPA), which is a probable human carcinogen and has been linked to everything from depression, to respiratory disease, to breast and colon cancer,” she said. “It is also an endocrine disruptor.”</p>

	<p>Of 1,486 containers carried on the vessel, 80 were classed as “dangerous goods” including caustic soda and nitric acid. The ship also carried epoxy resins, used in paints and primers, ethanol, and lead ingots, used to make vehicle batteries.</p> <p>The study concluded that current legislation and practices are insufficient to mitigate the risk of poorly packaged chemicals on ships.</p> <p>“Shipping is increasing, with 90% of the world’s trade moved by sea,” said Karlsson. “The cargo of these ships is so much more complex today. But the regulations have not kept up.”</p> <p>Chalani Rubesinghe, of CEJ, said the disaster had exposed the complexity of shipping chemicals. “These accidents have huge consequences on the environment and economies,” she said.</p> <p>The safety commission of the International Maritime Organization (IMO) has been discussing how to track containers and address the loss of pellets at sea.</p> <p>Sri Lanka has asked the IMO to classify plastic pellets as toxic substances, and Vanuatu is calling for better reporting of containers lost at sea.</p> <p>The Sri Lankan authorities said this week that clearing the wreck and debris of the sunken ship would take four months. They have filed an interim claim for damages of \$40m (£30m) with the operator of the X-Press Pearl.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/09 Study: 1-in-3 w/detectable levels herbicide
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/feb/09/toxic-herbicide-exposure-study-2-4-d
GIST	<p>One in three people across America have detectable levels of a toxic herbicide linked to cancers, birth defects and hormonal imbalances, a major nationwide survey has found.</p> <p>Human exposure to the herbicide 2,4-D has substantially risen amid expanding use among farmers despite a multitude of health and environmental concerns, according to the first nationally representative study evaluating the footprint of the chemical.</p> <p>The herbicide was developed in the mid-1940s and quickly became the go-to weedkiller for farmers focused on increasing crop yields, while also gaining popularity among gardeners looking for a pristine lawn.</p> <p>Its popularity dipped in favor of Roundup (glyphosate) and genetically modified cotton and soyabeans resistant to this herbicide, but it has seen a resurgence since the spread of Roundup-resistant weeds.</p> <p>2,4-D is currently riding high thanks to this Whac-a-Mole approach to pest control in industrialised farming, with about 600 US agricultural and residential products now containing the chemical which can be ingested through the skin, mouth and nose.</p> <p>Researchers from George Washington university examined the urine samples of 14,395 people (aged six and older) from all walks of life who take part in the annual National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey. They looked for biomarkers to the pesticide, and compared the exposure levels detected with the use of 2,4-D from 2001 until 2014.</p> <p>As the pesticide grew in popularity among farmers and gardeners, so did evidence of human exposure, rising from a low of 17% in 2001-02 to a high of almost 40% a decade later.</p> <p>Exposure to high levels of 2,4-D, an ingredient of Agent Orange used against civilians during the Vietnam war, has been linked to cancers including leukemia in children, birth defects and reproductive problems among other health issues.</p>

While little is known about the impact of low-level exposure to the herbicide, it does disrupt the endocrine system – a network of glands that make hormones which control growth and development, reproduction, metabolism and our organs and moods.

The study, published online in Environmental Health, found exposure was not uniform, with several subgroups including children aged six to 11 and women of childbearing age showing substantially higher levels of 2,4-D in their urine. Exposure to toxins is often more detrimental during developmental or key growth periods like pregnancy and early childhood.

“Further study must determine how rising exposure to 2,4-D affects human health—especially when exposure occurs early in life,” said Melissa Perry, professor of environmental and occupational health and senior author of the paper. “Children and other vulnerable groups are also increasingly exposed to other pesticides and these chemicals may act synergistically to produce health problems.”

The study also found that Black participants, who multiple previous studies have shown to have higher exposure to all sorts of environmental pollutants, showed signs of lower exposure to the weedkiller than white Americans. This may be a result of historic racist policies restricting access to homes with gardens and green spaces for Black communities, the researchers argue.

Overall, the amount of 2,4-D applied in agriculture increased 67% between 2012 and 2020, but its use will almost certainly grow sharply over the next decade due to the widespread use of the controversial weedkiller Enlist Duo – a relatively newly approved combo (2,4-D and glyphates) for genetically modified crops. This will make both toxins – which are both banned in some countries – increasingly difficult to avoid.

“Our study suggests human exposures to 2,4-D have gone up significantly and they are predicted to rise even more in the future,” Marlaina Freisthler, a PhD student and co-author of the study. “Given the potential for human and environmental health impacts of such widespread exposures, we believe increases in use and exposures are not the direction to be going.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 What happens to stealth jet on ocean floor?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/09/us/politics/navy-fighter-jet-china.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — On Jan. 24, one of the U.S. Navy’s most expensive warplanes crashed as it tried to land on an aircraft carrier and sank to the bottom of the South China Sea. The \$94 million F-35 Joint Strike Fighter is now the subject of a salvage operation.</p> <p>In a statement issued on the day of the incident, the Navy said seven sailors had been injured when the jet suffered a “landing mishap” on the aircraft carrier, the Carl Vinson. It did not mention that the plane had ended up in the ocean.</p> <p>The Navy has said little publicly since then about the incident. In response to questions from The New York Times, the Navy’s Seventh Fleet said last week that the service had “begun mobilizing units that will be used to verify the site and recover” the F-35 involved in the crash.</p> <p>Photos and videos that appeared to have been taken aboard the Vinson have been posted on social media. Public affairs officers said that some of the images — such as one of the F-35 on the ocean surface — were authentic. “There is an ongoing investigation into both the crash and the unauthorized release of the shipboard video footage,” said Cmdr. Zach Harrell, a spokesman for Naval Air Forces.</p> <p>It was only after a Twitter user posted video of the crash on Feb. 6 that Navy officials acknowledged that the jet had slammed into the rear of the flight deck before skidding the length of the ship and falling into the ocean.</p>

Will the Navy recover its expensive jet from the ocean floor before an adversary finds it? Here's what we know so far about the incident, and what the salvage operation might entail.

Where is the plane?

Short answer: We don't exactly know. We do, however, have a tantalizing clue from public statements. On Jan. 29, the Japanese Coast Guard posted a notice informing mariners of ongoing salvage operations in an area in the northern part of the South China Sea. The notice said salvage operations at a particular latitude and longitude would continue "until further notice."

The U.S. Navy's Japan-based Seventh Fleet directed questions about the notice to the Japanese Coast Guard, which said last week that the U.S. National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency had requested that the warning be posted. A spokeswoman for the agency, which is part of the Defense Department, directed queries about that notice back to the Navy.

The notice puts the salvage site roughly 13,000 feet below the surface of the ocean, and closer to the Philippines than to China.

The Navy's initial statement said three of the sailors injured in the crash had been evacuated to Manila for medical treatment. The Japanese Coast Guard's notice said the salvage location was about 320 miles from Manila — which is well within range of the Vinson's Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft that would have transported the injured sailors from the carrier to the Philippine capital.

Can the Navy recover a plane that deep in the ocean?

According to Navy documents, the service can lift a wrecked airplane from as deep as 20,000 feet by using a remote-operated vehicle the Navy calls [CURV-21](#). Weighing more than three tons, the box-shaped underwater drone can be deployed from the deck of a Navy salvage ship or a commercial vessel and controlled by technicians on the surface via a cable.

Last year, the Navy used a CURV-21 aboard a Norwegian-flagged civilian ship named the Grand Canyon II to [salvage an MH-60S helicopter](#) from a depth of more than 19,000 feet in the North Pacific Ocean.

Reached by phone, an executive with Volstad Maritime, which owns the Grand Canyon II, said the ship was not involved in the Navy's F-35 salvage effort. It is currently leased to an energy company and is working in oil and gas fields off Thailand.

How would the recovery work?

The Navy could use another ship to do the same job, as long as it has the ability to carry an underwater vehicle like CURV-21, which would be used to connect a cable from the ship to the airplane. The ship would also need to have a crane strong enough to lift the wreck off the ocean floor, probably one capable of lifting at least 100 tons. Additionally, the ship would most likely need a large open deck so the wreckage could be placed there.

During last year's deepwater helicopter salvage, a Maryland-based company called Phoenix International provided support on the Grand Canyon II. A Phoenix executive reached by phone declined to comment on whether the company was involved in the current F-35 salvage effort.

Could China recover the plane?

We don't know, but it's not outside the realm of possibility, given that China has already displayed underwater remote-operated vehicles of its own. The real question would be: Can the Chinese vehicles function at the same depth as the American ones?

Given that the F-35 crashed with a full aircraft carrier strike group in the vicinity, it is possible that the Navy has left a smaller escort warship, like a destroyer, to watch over the crash site. However, the Pentagon brushed off the idea that the Navy was in a race with its Chinese counterpart to pull the ship off the seafloor.

	<p>“I think you can understand we’re taking all the appropriate planning that we need to salvage our aircraft and we’re going to recover it in a timely manner, as we’ve done in the past,” John F. Kirby, the chief Pentagon spokesman, said at a news conference on Monday. “So I think any question about being in some sort of competition to recover what is in fact our property is speculative at best.”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/09 Solar storm destroys dozens of satellites
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/09/science/spacex-satellites-storm.html
GIST	<p>Over the past three years, SpaceX has deployed thousands of satellites into low-Earth orbit as part of its business to beam high-speed internet service from space. But the company’s latest deployment of 49 new satellites after a Feb. 3 launch did not go as planned.</p> <p>As a consequence of a geomagnetic storm triggered by a recent outburst of the sun, up to 40 of 49 newly launched Starlink satellites have been knocked out of commission. They are in the process of re-entering Earth’s atmosphere, where they will be incinerated.</p> <p>The incident highlights the hazards faced by numerous companies planning to put tens of thousands of small satellites in orbit to provide internet service from space. And it’s possible that more solar outbursts will knock some of these newly deployed orbital transmitters out of the sky. The sun has an 11-year-long cycle in which it oscillates between hyperactive and quiescent states. Presently, it is ramping up to its peak, which has been forecast to arrive around 2025.</p> <p>This recent solar paroxysm was relatively moderate by the sun’s standards. “I have every confidence that we’re going to see an extreme event in the next cycle, because that typically is what happens during a solar maximum,” said Hugh Lewis, a space debris expert at the University of Southampton in England. If a milquetoast outburst can knock out 40 Starlink satellites hanging out at low orbital altitudes, a more potent solar scream has the potential to inflict greater harm on the mega-constellations of SpaceX and other companies.</p> <p>SpaceX announced the looming destruction of as many as 40 of its satellites in a company blog post on Tuesday night. The company said that after the launch, the satellites were released to their intended orbit, about 130 miles above Earth.</p> <p>This altitude was chosen partly to prevent potential collisions in the future with other satellites. If the satellites malfunction after being deployed at that altitude, and are unable to raise their orbits to more secure heights, “the atmosphere kind of reclaims the failed technology very rapidly,” Dr. Lewis said. “And that’s a very good safety measure.”</p> <p>But on Jan. 29, before these satellites launched, a violent eruption from the sun of highly energetic particles and magnetism known as a coronal mass ejection was detected. That ejection arrived at Earth sometime around Feb. 2, creating a geomagnetic storm in Earth’s magnetic bubble.</p> <p>The powerful storm added kinetic energy to particles in Earth’s atmosphere. “The atmosphere kind of puffs up, expands, as a result,” Dr. Lewis said. That expansion causes an increase in the atmosphere’s density, which in turn increases the drag experienced by objects moving through it, including satellites. This drag shrinks the size of their orbits, which draws them closer to the thick, lower atmosphere in which they burn up.</p> <p>According to SpaceX, during the recent Starlink deployment, “the escalation speed and severity of the storm caused atmospheric drag to increase up to 50 percent higher than during previous launches.” This ensured that as many as 40 of the 49 satellites would eventually succumb to the forces of gravity and perish.</p> <p>There are currently a total of 1,915 Starlink satellites in orbit, so for SpaceX, a loss of up to 40 “is not a big deal from their point of view,” said Jonathan McDowell, an astronomer at the Harvard and</p>

Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics in Cambridge, Mass., who also catalogs and tracks artificial space objects.

But Dr. Lewis said “that probably accounts for potentially up to \$100 million of hardware, if you include the cost of the launch.”

The dangers that solar outbursts and geomagnetic storms pose to objects in low-Earth orbit, from electrical damage to communications disruptions, [are well known](#). The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration ranks geomagnetic storms [on a scale](#) from minor to extreme. The latest, a “[moderate](#)” [storm](#), is noted by the agency as possibly causing changes in atmospheric drag that can alter orbits.

With these risks being known, did SpaceX take this hazard into account during this Starlink deployment?

“I’m just kind of dumbfounded,” said [Samantha Lawler](#), an astronomer at the University of Regina in Canada. “Really? They did not think of this?”

“It’s a bit of a surprise,” said Dr. McDowell. “They should have been ready for this, one would have thought.”

When contacted by email, a SpaceX media representative said that no one was available to answer questions, noting that “it’s an incredibly demanding time for the team.”

That these satellites seem to be quickly entering the atmosphere, rather than lingering in low-Earth orbit, is a good thing. They also pose no threat to anyone on the ground. “From a safety perspective, the system functioned exactly as it should have,” Dr. Lewis said. “The satellites de-orbited, and nothing else was put at risk.”

Most satellites [orbit at higher altitudes](#) and can avoid the hazards posed by atmospheric expansion. But the threat to satellites orbiting at lower altitudes is far from over, and it leads to the question of whether SpaceX can continue deploying spacecraft at this low altitude.

“As the sun gets more active, it releases an increasing amount of extreme ultraviolet, which gets absorbed into our atmosphere,” Dr. Lewis said. That atmosphere will expand significantly, and “the expectation is that the atmospheric density is going to increase by one or two orders of magnitude. That’s a way bigger change compared to what we’ve just seen with this particular event.”

Many astronomers have been critical of Starlink and other satellite constellations, which reflect sunlight and will potentially interfere with telescope research on Earth. And some see this incident as emblematic of SpaceX’s attitude toward problems occurring in low-Earth orbit.

“If things fail, they fix them and do things better next time,” Dr. Lewis said. “This is another example of that” — a policy of adherence to hindsight, not foresight.

The death of these satellites is “a harsh lesson for SpaceX,” Dr. Lewis said. What happens next is up to them.

Dr. Lawler added, “I hope this will knock a little bit of sense into them.”

[Return to Top](#)

Crime, Criminals

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 Cartel borrows terrorist brutal tactics
SOURCE	https://nypost.com/2022/02/09/mexican-cartel-borrows-middle-east-terrorists-brutal-tactics/

GIST

Mexico's most powerful drug cartel has turned to al-Qaeda and Taliban-inspired guerrilla tactics in a bloody new phase of their battle to wipe out their rivals.

The Jalisco New Generation Cartel, known by their Spanish-language acronym CJNG, is using landmines and explosives-laden drones to kill other gang members, cops and soldiers in a savage campaign of murder. The gang is also working with Middle East jihadi "technical advisors," according to Mexican law enforcement and security sources.

"Their philosophy is basically if you are not with us, you are against us," said Robert Almonte, a Texas-based security consultant and expert on Mexican cartels.

"That includes the police that refuse to be on their payroll, local communities and their rivals. It doesn't surprise me that they are consulting with terrorists because what they are engaging in are acts of terrorism."

The Mexican army defused 12 handmade landmines last week in Tepalcatepec, in Michoacan state, where the CJNG is dominant, according to [Milenio, a national newspaper based in Monterrey](#). One powerful explosive damaged an armored vehicle and injured 10 soldiers, the paper said.

The state is heavily controlled by the Jalisco cartel and is among the most dangerous areas in the country, with 200 homicides reported this year. Last year, the state recorded more than 2,700 murders, according to law enforcement data.

Mexican security experts cited by Milenio described most of the CJNG explosives as metal pipes filled with gunpowder and attached to a battery and detonator. The devices are buried underground and explode upon contact with a vehicle.

"Jalisco Nueva Generacion was the first to use drones with explosives attached to them, so it doesn't surprise me that they are now using landmines and taking a page from al Qaeda," Almonte told The Post.

"The mines are something new for them," he said. "They appear to be similar to the ones used against US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan."

Last month, the Jalisco cartel used [a drone to drop explosives](#) on an encampment of displaced people in a Michoacan forest, according to El Universal newspaper. The video footage, taken from the drone, shows dozens of people running for their lives as the explosives ignite trees in a fiery blaze near the municipality of Tepalcatepec.

The municipality is at the crossroads where the CJNG is fighting a turf war against its main rival, the Carteles Unidos, a criminal organization made up of gangs, including Cartel de Tepalcatepec, Los Viagras and other groups bent on destroying the CJNG, according to InSight Crime.

"We've now had four months of insecurity," said Tepalcatepec Mayor Martha Laura Mendoza last month. "But nobody turns around to see [what's happening]. This is the only municipality where there are more than 3,000 displaced people. Four months and no one provides a solution."

In September 2021, five men who were guarding a checkpoint to keep cartel members out of the region were decapitated by CJNG, according to reports. The Jalisco cartel also warned local residents in audio recordings to keep out of their way.

Led by Nemesio Ruben Oseguera Cervantes (aka El Mencho), CJNG is among Mexico's most violent cartels, according to the US Drug Enforcement Administration.

The cartel is particularly known for its bold attacks on Mexican security forces. A [2015 ambush](#) by the cartel left 15 officers dead. The group was also behind an assassination attempt on Mexico City's police

	<p>chief Omar Garcia Harfuch in 2020, when the top cop was shot at 414 times but wasn't hit, though two bodyguards and one passerby were killed.</p> <p>El Mencho is the most wanted man in Mexico and among the most wanted in the US, with a DEA bounty of \$10 million for information leading to his capture.</p> <p>In November, Mexican security forces arrested El Mencho's wife Rosalinda Gonzalez, who headed up the criminal organization's finances. She was released on \$78,000 bail.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/09 Court: Uganda to pay DRC \$325M reparations
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/uganda-ordered-to-pay-democratic-republic-of-the-congo-325-million-in-reparations-11644444647?mod=hp_listc_pos3
GIST	<p>The International Court of Justice has ordered Uganda to pay \$325 million to the Democratic Republic of the Congo for the prolonged conflict that erupted between the two countries in the 1990s.</p> <p>“The Court notes that the reparation awarded to the DRC for damage to persons and to property reflects the harm suffered by individuals and communities as a result of Uganda’s breach of its international obligations,” Judge Joan E. Donoghue, the court’s president, said in the ruling.</p> <p>Ugandan officials weren’t immediately available for comment.</p> <p>The ruling segmented damages into three distinct sections: \$225 million for damage to persons; \$40 million for damage to property; and \$60 million for damage related to natural resources.</p> <p>The Hague-based court, a United Nations tribunal that handles disputes between countries, said the total amount for the first \$250 million damages will be paid in five annual installments of \$65 million, starting Sept. 1. It said the judgment amounts were within Uganda’s capacity to pay.</p> <p>Congo originally asked for more than \$11 billion in damages.</p> <p>The country first brought its dispute with Uganda, which borders Congo to its northeast, to the International Court of Justice in 1999. The yearslong conflict between the countries had triggered a rush for Congolese mineral wealth, drawing in neighboring countries in a conflict that left more than five million people dead.</p> <p>In 2005, the court found Uganda liable for reparations. It ruled that Uganda violated the principle of nonintervention and breached human-rights laws through the “brutalities committed by its army.”</p> <p>“The unlawful military intervention by Uganda was of such magnitude and duration that the Court considers it to be a grave violation of the prohibition of the use of force,” the tribunal wrote at the time.</p> <p>Quoting the 2005 findings, Judge Donoghue in Wednesday’s ruling said the court showed Uganda “committed acts of killing, torture and other forms of inhumane treatment of the Congolese civilian population, destroyed villages and civilian buildings, failed to distinguish between civilian and military targets.”</p> <p>Relations between Kampala and Kinshasa have appeared to improve in recent years and the two militaries are working together in operations against an ISIS-affiliated outfit in eastern Congo. The Ugandan military launched a series of strikes against Islamic State-aligned militants in Congo in November 2021.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	02/09 Kitsap Co. deputies look for prolific car thief
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/hes-a-menace-kitsap-county-deputies-looking-for-prolific-car-thief

GIST	<p>PORT ORCHARD, Wash. - Kitsap County Sheriff's Deputies are looking for a man they say is a prolific car thief, who recently rammed a stolen vehicle into parked cars, including a patrol vehicle.</p> <p>Deputies say 26-year-old Brandon Charles Ervin is a transient who mostly lives in vehicles he stole. He has been seen all over Kitsap County, and favors Honda's, but will probably take anything, deputies say.</p> <p>On Feb. 8, deputies found him in a car and tried to contact him. Ervin rammed into a Kitsap County Sheriff's deputy's vehicle while before escaping, deputies said.</p> <p>He sped away from the scene, but was several yards from a school, deputies said. Deputies did not chase him because, at that point, it would have been a danger to the public.</p> <p>Ervin is also suspected of several other car thefts, including one that left him and another driver in serious condition after a high-speed crash in November 2021. He was taken to the hospital after that crash but not booked.</p> <p>In another instance back in January, Port Orchard police were notified that there was a stolen vehicle in a Goodwill parking lot. The driver, who police say was Ervin, rammed the stolen car into a patrol vehicle and hit other cars before making his escape.</p> <p>"We are looking hard for Brandon Ervin, who is a prolific car thief in our county, has been very active lately. He's a menace. We need to get him into custody. We have several warrants out for his arrest and we need to find him and get him off the streets," said Kitsap County Sheriff's Lt. Ken Dickinson.</p> <p>Law enforcement officials say Ervin is just a small part of a larger problem involving car thefts in western Washington.</p> <p>The Puget Sound Auto Theft Task Force just recently released new numbers highlighting the growing problem of car thefts. In King County, 1,455 vehicles were stolen in January alone. In Pierce County, more than 905 vehicles were stolen in January, which is down slightly from the 915 in December.</p> <p>In Kitsap County, where Ervin is usually found, thieves stole more than 190 vehicles in January, which is up from 151 in December and an even smaller 86 in November of 2021.</p> <p>"We have had a rash of car thefts in our county, which many other counties have been having. He's involved in many of those. He's been running away from us routinely," said Dickinson.</p> <p>Ervin is a white man with red hair and a beard. He is about 6'01" and weighs around 170 pounds. He has the words "Beautiful Struggle" tattooed on his right arm and has a crown tattooed on his left hand.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/09 Ballard residents decry illegally parked RVs
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/project-seattle/double-standard-on-parking-enforcement-in-ballard-frustrates-residents
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — The residents who are living in illegally parked RVs are continuing to plague residents of Seattle's Ballard neighborhood who say the RVs appear to be flouting the city's 72-hour, no-parking rule.</p> <p>When Mayor Bruce Harrell took office, residents who live near 8th Avenue NW in Ballard said they expected change, but some neighbors said the city's double standard on parking enforcement is still creating a safe haven for RV owners' bad behavior on their street.</p> <p>"It's certainly gotten worse and worse," said neighbor Nina Morotti.</p>

The rowdy music coming from a parked RV called the “Homeless Recording Studio,” continues to be a thorn in the side for the residents who live nearby. They say the RV owner continues to play his drums at all hours of the day, prompting a steady stream of complaints to the city.

“We have people who do follow the rules,” said resident Brent Siegfried. “And those who don’t.”

The RV in question has been parked in the same spot for weeks with stacks of tickets piling up on the windshield. But the vehicle remains in the same spot, upsetting residents who say the city is not enforcing its no-parking rule beyond 72 hours.

“I saw tickets on several cars but no one got towed,” said Peter Beinhardt, who works in the area at Data Pro.

Other RVs in the area that KOMO News has been tracking have residents living in them but they also haven’t gone anywhere either, including the notorious double decker RV whose owner added another wooden structure on top of the RV.

“We would like to see that this is enforced for everyone,” Beinhardt said, who is sharply critical of the Seattle Department of Transportation for what he calls a double standard when it comes to parking enforcement.

“When I go downtown, I’m aware that we don’t really park 72 hours,” he said. “Here, it seems it’s ignored. No one cares.”

City transportation officials pretty much admitted that the agency treats people differently if they live in RVs.

“Our initial focus has been on clearing unoccupied abandoned vehicles,” SDOT said in a written statement. “Members of the parking enforcement team do not tow occupied vehicles.”

Morotti said there is too much uncertainty.

“Here, it does get confusing,” she said. “You’re kind of like, ‘What’s the difference?’”

Part of the confusion stems from a ruling issued last year by the Washington Supreme Court, which barred cities from towing vehicles if people are living inside.

But while protections are in place for RV dwellers, others who live in houses in the area say no one is looking out for their interests.

“If you’re paying your taxes and doing everything on the up and up, then you are held accountable,” Siegfried said. “But if you choose to not be held accountable, no one will hold you to it, and you can do what you want.”

Mayor Harrell was unavailable for comment today but a spokesperson says the administration is reviewing and evaluating existing city rules and regulations around RVs.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 Seattle businesses: crime out of control
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/chinatown-id-seattle-business-owners-call-out-city-leaders-demand-action-to-stop-crime
GIST	SEATTLE — Frustrated and fed up, several small businesses in Seattle’s Chinatown-International District are calling out city leaders. They want something done, right now about out-of-control crime in hotspots like 12th and Jackson.

Mayor Bruce Harrell said he knows people are frustrated. He said people have a right to be.

But many small business owners in Little Saigon and Chinatown-International District said they need action and they need it now before someone else gets hurt.

"Right now, we have to take care of the everyday citizen," said said Yenvy Pham, who owns Pho Bac Sup Shop on South Jackson Street in Seattle's Little Saigon neighborhood. "No one feels safe. My coworkers don't feel safe. I don't feel safe."

"It's just a block away from the corner of 12th and Jackson--- a notorious spot known for illegal activity including drugs, stolen merchandise and as well as shootings.

"The black market at 12th and Jackson is expanding and growing every day," Pham said.

Pham shared this video of a threatening man in front of her business Monday.

"He had a really long knife--kind of like a machete," Pham said. "He was using the reflection of the window to scratch himself."

Furious and frustrated, she blasted the city and the mayor on Instagram.

"We shouldn't have to spend so much time and energy trying to defend ourselves and trying to feel safe," Pham said.

KOMO News took her criticisms and questions directly to Mayor Bruce Harrell Wednesday.

We asked him this: "Yenvy Pham in CID and Little Saigon is really concerned about what's happening at 12th and Jackson. She wants to know why the city is allowing this to continue, and what your plan to stop it?"

"She should be frustrated," Harrell said. "There's not a simple button to push to make sure all the illicit activity will be gone. However, what we're looking at are sustainable solutions. So, she will see here in a matter of a few weeks, not only a plan but an implementation of a plan."

I-Miun Liu, the owner of Oasis Tea Zone in Chinatown-International District said the city and city leaders are all talk and no action right now.

"There's been no improvement," Liu said. "There's endless meetings. But what metrics are they going to consider?"

Liu is so frustrated; he's hired a bouncer/door man for his bubble tea shop for Friday and Saturday nights to keep his customers and staff safe.

"People are actually getting shot," Liu said. "They are actually getting killed. How much longer can you wait for progress."

Harrell said he'll lay out a specific plan next Tuesday. He said his State of the City will have details on how the city will curb crime in places like 12th and Jackson.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 Deputies recover \$100,000 stolen property
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/south-sound-news/pierce-county-deputies-recover-100000-stolen-property/OBXUW7GMERGTPHKUZ5XEQJOURM/

GIST	<p>After serving a search warrant at a storage unit on Tuesday, Pierce County deputies recovered \$100,000 worth of equipment stolen from five businesses, according to a Facebook post from the Pierce County Sheriff's Office.</p> <p>Deputies with the Proactive Property Crimes Unit discovered the storage unit during an investigation into January's fatal hit-and-run involving two 12-year-old girls in Midland.</p> <p>The driver and the man who gave him a ride home were both arrested after that hit-and-run.</p> <p>As deputies investigated the suspects' activities, they discovered they were involved in significant property theft.</p> <p>A follow-up to that investigation led detectives to the storage unit where the property was recovered.</p> <p>During the arrest of the driver, deputies also recovered \$15,000 worth of property belonging to one of the same businesses.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/09 King County Drug Diversion Court
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/seattle/king-county-drug-court-offers-hope/281-51cfcc47-a786-4191-82a0-624079a32970
GIST	<p>KING COUNTY, Wash. — Inside Peer Kent, the day started with a viewing party for a major victory - graduation day.</p> <p>A total of seven graduates attended a virtual ceremony marking their successful completion of King County Drug Diversion Court, a program Michael Robertson graduated from years ago.</p> <p>"I am a three-time felon, all of my felonies were drug related," Robertson said.</p> <p>The fourth time Robertson found himself facing a felony, he was given the chance to get into drug diversion court.</p> <p>"Without this program, my life right now ... I believe I would probably be staring death in the face," he said.</p> <p>But today, Robertson works at Peer Kent, helping others navigate drug diversion court.</p> <p>It is a program Kwan, 42, found out about from his attorney while he was in jail.</p> <p>"I wasn't interested in getting clean, honestly. But you know, I wanted to do whatever to get out of jail at the time," Kwan said.</p> <p>Kwan's addiction started in high school and intensified over the next couple of decades until he was hooked on heroin, he said. When Kwan entered drug diversion court, he had to go through a five-phase program.</p> <p>Drug court offers individuals charged with felony drug crimes and property crimes motivated by addiction the opportunity for substance use disorder and mental health treatment, access to other services such as housing, transportation, and job skills training, according to KCDDC's website. Successful completion of drug diversion court results in the dismissal of felonies.</p> <p>"If you don't graduate, the alternative is that you could go to prison," Kwan said.</p> <p>Robertson, who said recovery "needs to be normalized," benefitted from drug diversion court.</p>

	<p>On Wednesday, after more than two years of work, Kwan can say the same.</p> <p>"Now I don't want to get high anymore. I'm more interested in making money, working, and I just care about things again," Kwan said.</p> <p>Kwan has found himself a full-time job.</p> <p>As for Robertson, he's following a career path he's passionate about, working at Peer Kent and helping others reach their own graduation day.</p> <p>"You could have a million dollars, or you could be living in the back seat of a car like I was, and if you don't have the right support, you are not going to heal," Robertson said. "My hope for the graduates is that they can spread that message."</p> <p>According to the King County Prosecuting Attorney's Office, King County Drug Diversion Court was created in August 1994 by the late Norm Maleng and then King County Superior Court Judge Ricardo Martinez. King County's Drug Court was the 12th drug court in the country. Today, there are drug courts in every state and more than 3,000 nationwide.</p> <p>In King County, more than 2,700 people have graduated from Drug Court since 1994.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/09 Seattle police: Pioneer Square shooting
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/man-shot-multiple-times-in-pioneer-square/
GIST	<p>A man in his 20s was shot multiple times Wednesday in the 200 block of James Street, according to the Seattle Police Department.</p> <p>Witnesses reported the shooting around 1:30 p.m., Detective Patrick Michaud wrote in a blotter post. A possible suspect wearing gray clothing fled the scene in a Jeep Cherokee, witnesses told police.</p> <p>Arriving officers provided first aid until Seattle Fire Department medics arrived, according to the post.</p> <p>The man was taken to Harborview Medical Center in stable condition, said SFD spokesperson Kristin Tinsley.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	02/09 Mexico troops enter cartel-dominated town
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/mexican-soldiers-cartel-dominated-michoacan-town-82782403
GIST	<p>MEXICO CITY -- Mexico's Defense Department announced Wednesday that soldiers have rolled into a township dominated by the Jalisco cartel for the first time in months.</p> <p>The army sent what appeared to be hundreds of troops and trucks into the township of Aguililla, in western Michoacan state, on Tuesday. It is an area where the Jalisco cartel is fighting a bloody turf war with the local Viagras gang.</p> <p>The troops broke up a civilian blockade of a small army base in Aguililla that had blocked its entrances since last summer. For months, troops stationed there abandoned the base, but they never ventured out of it either.</p> <p>The defense department said the government was starting "a dialogue for the pacification of Aguililla" and "freeing the areas of organized crime presence" in Aguililla and other towns nearby.</p> <p>The department distributed photos of heaps of weapons, bulletproof vests and two homemade armored cars labelled with the initials of the Jalisco New Generation drug cartel.</p>

The army accused many of the townspeople of Aguililla of acting as the “social base” of the Jalisco drug cartel, because they blockaded the base and confronted soldiers during protests.

But some residents of Aguililla in return accuse the army of only attacking the Jalisco cartel, while leaving the rival Viagras gang — which also goes by the "United Cartels"— free to set up highway checkpoints to extort money and threaten local residents.

The area raises limes and cattle, and the United Cartels have imposed a “war tax” on outbound shipments of those products and on inbound supplies. That has helped force up the price of limes nationwide.

Protesters in Aguililla have demanded the army open the roads and act with equal force against both cartels.

Aguililla resident José Francisco Helizondo, who had helped organize protests and the blockade of the army base, said locals had reacted “with fear, with distrust, thinking that things could happen like they did two years ago and that now the United Cartels will enter along with the government to take reprisals against the people.”

That was a reference to the number of times over the last few years that towns in the area have changed hands in the see-saw turf war.

The warring cartels have used trenches, sharpshooters and bombs dropped by drones in battling each other, and have increasingly put civilians on the front lines of the fighting.

In late January, evidence emerged the gangs have also begun using improvised explosive devices (IEDs) on roads to disable army vehicles.

The self-defense movement in the town of Tepalcatepec, near Aguililla, said improvised land mines severely damaged an army armored car late last week. It would be the first time IEDs have been successfully used by cartels in Mexico.

The Mexican Army did not respond to a request for specific comment on the IEDs. But the Defense Department did say army patrols were attacked in the area four times with explosives, homemade armored cars and gunfire that wounded 10 soldiers. The department did not specify what type of explosives were involved.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 MI gov. kidnapping plot trial: 2nd guilty plea
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/2nd-guilty-plea-made-alleged-kidnapping-plot-michigan/story?id=82771272
GIST	<p>A second man charged in a bizarre plot to kidnap Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer pleaded guilty Wednesday and has agreed to testify for the prosecution at the federal trial of four other defendants.</p> <p>Kaleb Franks, 27, of Waterford, Michigan, admitted in U.S. District in Grand Rapids that he and other members of the Wolverine Watchmen, a Michigan-based self-styled "militia" group, hatched the plot to abduct Whitmer at her summer home in 2020 because they were upset by the state's COVID-19 restrictions.</p> <p>The plot, which allegedly included plans to use semiautomatic assault-type weapons and to bomb a bridge near Whitmer's vacation home, was foiled by undercover law enforcement officers who infiltrated the group.</p> <p>"Did any law enforcement officers suggest kidnapping the governor?" U.S. Magistrate Judge Phillip Green asked Franks during Wednesday's hearing.</p> <p>Franks replied, "No sir."</p>

Franks admitted in court that the kidnapping plan originated solely with him and the others charged in the conspiracy.

Lawyers for the other men facing trial in March filed a motion to dismiss the charges, arguing they were entrapped. The judge rejected that motion.

Franks' guilty plea comes after another man charged in the case, Ty Garbin, 25, pleaded guilty last year to firearms charges and conspiracy charges of providing material support for terrorists. Garbin was sentenced in August to 75 months in prison.

Garbin is also expected to testify for the prosecution in the upcoming federal trial for Adam Fox, 40, Barry Croft Jr., 45, Daniel Harris, 24, and Brandon Caserta, 33. Eight other men face charges in state court stemming from the kidnap plot.

Franks admitted being deeply involved in the kidnap plot, participating in meetings and training sessions, and surveillance conducted on Whitmer's vacation home in his signed plea agreement.

After the plot was thwarted, Whitmer alleged in an interview with ABC's "Good Morning America" that the plan included more than kidnaping her.

"This was a very serious thought-out plot to kill police officers, to bomb our capitol, killing Democrats and Republicans alike, and to kidnap and ultimately put me on trial and kill me as well," Whitmer said on "GMA." "These are the types of things you hear from groups like ISIS. This is not a militia; it is a domestic terror organization."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	02/09 Triple murder solved after 50yrs
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/triple-murder-solved-50-years-clue-suspects-son/story?id=82777778
GIST	<p>A 50-year-old triple homicide case has finally been closed, after a suspect's son provided clues that led investigators to the so-called Dixie Mafia, authorities said.</p> <p>On Feb. 3, 1972, a family of three was found murdered in their home in Boone, North Carolina, during a snowstorm. Bryce Durham, 51, his wife, Virginia, 44, and their 18-year-old son, Bobby, had been strangled to death. The couple's son-in-law, Troy Hall, found the family in their bathroom after he and his wife, Ginny, went to check on them.</p> <p>The Watauga County Sheriff's Office had been unable to solve the brutal murders for decades -- until a break came in 2019. Investigators received a "very important" tip from Georgia authorities, Watauga County Sheriff Len Hagaman said in a statement.</p> <p>The White County Sheriff's Office in Georgia had inadvertently come across information that potentially tied the murders to four men -- Billy Sunday Birt, Billy Wayne Davis, Bobby Gene Gaddis and Charles David Reed -- who authorities said were part of a Georgia-based network known as the Dixie Mafia. The group was purported to have committed dozens of violent crimes across the Southeast in the 1960s and 1970s.</p> <p>While participating in research for a book about Georgia crime at the White County Sheriff's Office, one of Billy Sunday Birt's sons, Shane Birt, claimed that during a prison visit his father "admitted to killing three people in the North Carolina mountains during a heavy snowstorm," the Watauga County Sheriff's Office said in a statement.</p> <p>Upon hearing that, the White County Sheriff's Office contacted Watauga County authorities, who started investigating the new lead in the cold case. That included three in-person interviews with the only surviving suspect -- Davis -- between September 2019 and August 2021, authorities said.</p>

"It was these interviews that ultimately helped us determine who was responsible through the corroboration of evidence," the Watauga County Sheriff's Office said. "We are confident that we now know who committed these crimes."

Davis, 81, a convicted murderer serving a life sentence at a correctional facility in Augusta, Georgia, allegedly implicated Billy Sunday Birt, Gaddis and Reed in the Durham case, saying they were engaging in a hired "hit."

"Davis claimed to have acted only as their getaway driver, and that it was the other three men that entered the house that night," the Watauga County Sheriff's Office said. "It remains unclear who solicited the crime against the Durham family."

The Durham case was similar to a 1973 crime in Georgia known as the Fleming case that also involved the four suspects, authorities said.

"This is a much-needed turning point for the Durham case," Hagaman said. "We cannot begin to express our thanks to all the professionals and community members who collaborated for so many years to help resolve this case."

Ginny Durham, whose parents and brother were killed, also thanked those who had worked on the case for decades.

"I know that they sacrificed many days and weekends in order to work on solving this case since 1972," she said in a statement. "I would especially like to thank Len Hagaman, sheriff of Watauga County, who has been involved from the beginning and was dedicated to a closure for myself and my family."

One of Billy Sunday Birt's sons recalled his father apparently talking about the Durham case in an interview with WSOC, the ABC affiliate in Charlotte, North Carolina.

"He'd just sort of hint every once in a while, and he'd say something. On this particular occasion, he told my baby brothers about one time he was in North Carolina in a snowstorm" on a hit, Billy Birt told the station. "And that was the clue that connected the dots."

Billy Sunday Birt died in 2017 while serving a life sentence for three murders committed in the 1970s.

"They was a loose group of locals that learnt how to rub two quarters together to make a dollar without working, and got away with it for 15 years and hauled more whiskey than anyone in history in those 15 years," Billy Birt said of the origins of the Dixie Mafia. "And that led to other things: bank robberies ... murder for hire."

Pat Maddux, whose late husband was a North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation agent who spent years following leads in the Durham case, told WSOC that the resolution is a "big relief to all of us here."

"The biggest case, I guess, we have had in Boone," she said. "Something like that has never happened here before."

[Return to Top](#)

Information From Online Communities and Unclassified Sources/InFOCUS is a situational awareness report published daily by the Washington State Fusion Center.

If you no longer wish to receive this report, please submit an email to intake@wsfc.wa.gov and enter UNSUBSCRIBE InFOCUS in the Subject line.

DISCLAIMER - the articles highlighted within InFOCUS is for informational purposes only and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Washington State Fusion Center, the City of Seattle, the Seattle Police Department or the Washington State Patrol and have been included only for ease of reference and academic purposes.

FAIR USE Notice All rights to these copyrighted items are reserved. Articles and graphics have been placed within for educational and discussion purposes only, in compliance with 'Fair Use' criteria established in Section 107 of the Copyright Act of 1976. The principle of 'Fair Use' was established as law by Section 107 of The Copyright Act of 1976. 'Fair Use' legally eliminates the need to obtain permission or pay royalties for the use of previously copyrighted materials if the purposes of display include 'criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching, scholarship, and research.' Section 107 establishes four criteria for determining whether the use of a work in any particular case qualifies as a 'fair use'. A work used does not necessarily have to satisfy all four criteria to qualify as an instance of 'fair use'. Rather, 'fair use' is determined by the overall extent to which the cited work does or does not substantially satisfy the criteria in their totality. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes of your own that go beyond 'fair use,' you must obtain permission from the copyright owner. For more information go to: [≤http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/17/107.shtml>](http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/17/107.shtml)

THIS DOCUMENT MAY CONTAIN COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL. COPYING AND DISSEMINATION IS PROHIBITED WITHOUT PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNERS.

Source: <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/17/107.shtml>

[Return to Top](#)